

EDD

Examining the impact of a discussion group on the self-perception of Early Years Practitioners

Louis, Stella

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**Examining the impact of a discussion
group on the self-perception of
Early Years Practitioners**

By
Stella Louis
MA

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requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education (EdD)*

Department of Education

University of Roehampton
Kingston University

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Abstract

Education reform has created an environment in the Early Years sector in which Early Years Practitioners (EYPs) are increasingly directed to look for outcomes, rather than developing an understanding about the process of learning. The issue of EYP competence and knowledge is often overestimated by an education system which assumes that confidence and high levels of understanding are standard. Therefore, reconciling the difference between what policies expect, and what EYPs can do, is of great interest. Working from a Vygotskyian perspective on group collaboration and peer learning, this study examines the effect of an intervention with a team of EYPs, who took part in group supervision sessions to explore their Observation, Assessment and Planning practice. The aim is to help to develop a model which can support and enhance professional practice.

The study began with four participants who attended ten facilitated group discussions over ten months, in which they addressed specific observational issues to gain insight into how their key child was learning. These sessions provided an opportunity for the participants to engage in professional dialogue and robustly analyse their observations. Data was interpreted using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), to explore how a group approach might support the participants' professional development and their understanding of children's learning.

The EYPs reported links between their own learning within the group and changes in their practice and understanding about children's learning.

Evidence from the study suggests that the Group Intervention had a positive impact on the participants' practice and that they developed skills in making professional judgements about how best to support and extend the child's learning. The findings also suggest that collaborative endeavours are a key factor in helping EYPs to succeed at their OAP tasks and enable the development of professional learning.

The Researcher's Story

The personal impetus for the work

It was important for me to locate myself within the research process and to acknowledge and be aware of the impact that my experiences had on the entire research project. In practice, this meant having an understanding of who I am and where I am coming from, acknowledging what I do and do not know, and committing to a continuing relational learning process. Clough and Nutbrown (2012:38) suggest that it is the function of methodology to expose, identify and explain research assumptions and beliefs in relation to the issue being studied, thereby examining the claims made by the researcher. In the same way it is the duty of the researcher to recognise their research tools and their reason for their selection.

This research project was set in a private nursery and reflected influences unique to this nursery setting. At the time of this project I was working as an Early Years Consultant supporting teachers and Early Years Practitioners (EYPs) in their work with young children. The nursery where I did the research was not one where I had been working as a consultant. My role often involved wearing two hats – one, quality improvement and two, training. I set out to examine how EYPs use their observations to improve children's learning.

This investigation originated from a series of observations in a number of nursery settings – I was concerned that EYPs were taking an approach to gathering observations in which play got pushed out in favour of a more adult-directed delivery of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)

curriculum. These EYPs tended to see play as a vehicle for learning without looking at anything beyond that – although that is important, I became increasingly concerned that play was losing its meaning in these nurseries.

My interest in observations was first sparked during my National Nursery Nurse Examination Board (NNEB) training in 1985, in which I completed 60 child observations, along with a baby study. I visited an expectant couple each month from seven months gestation until the baby was 18 months old. Whilst completing this baby study, I became interested in the work of Fredrick Froebel (1887), for his insight on play being superior to other forms of human development and his focus on the whole child; Lev Vygotsky (1978) for the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD); and Susan Isaacs (1930) for her meticulous observations which allowed observers to step into the child's shoes, together with Jean Piaget (1969) and the techniques that he used with his own children.

These theorists showed me possibilities about the detail that might be noticed in my observations, as well as the absence of behaviours that they thought of as significant. These starting points sparked a career of exploring different approaches to observing children and making meaning from observations according to various constructs. At one point in my career I became a college lecturer in South East London and I had a fascinating experience teaching NNEB students how to observe children. Here I was able to pass on some child development knowledge gleaned from Froebel, Vygotsky and more.

For me, what is important about these theorists is that they all based their understanding of children on observing them, as opposed to only relying on a

developmental checklist. I still believe that nursery nurses are often good at their work as a result of their observation practice.

In 2009, I took classes led by Professor Tina Bruce, as part of my own professional development, and in 2010 I was selected as a research assistant to work with Professor Bruce, supporting development and learning on a project funded by The Froebel Trust in an informal settlement in Soweto, South Africa. This project focused on working with a group of practitioners who had not before been trained for their work with children. My role was to identify the teachers' strengths and develop these in culturally appropriate, sustainable ways. For more information please see: Tina Bruce, (2010) *Can ABCD Help to Develop a Froebelian Approach to Early Childhood Education in One Community in Soweto, South Africa?*; Stella Louis (2012) *It's As Easy As ABC (and D): Froebel's Principles in South African Kindergartens* and Tina Bruce, Stella Louis, and Georgie McCall, (2015) *Observing Young Children*.

This project had a profound impact on how I support both development and learning. For example, the five classrooms were packed with up to 50 children and one practitioner, children were grouped according to their age (18 months to six years) and, regardless of age, all of the children were expected to do the same thing at the same time. This project helped me to challenge this practice, resulting in the practitioners questioning their methods and moving away from rote learning to provide the children with opportunities for hands-on learning.

These experiences, as well as parenting my own daughter, have given me a platform to speak from and have shaped my thoughts, actions and

judgements. The account which follows is a critical reflection of my personal experience throughout the research process, as I see it, and the impact it had on the study.

Researcher relationships within the project, including critical consideration of how power and empowerment are understood and play out

Empowerment was played out in practice through the EYPs taking part in the group discussions and in how I facilitated these, so that they felt valued and encouraged to interpret their observations for themselves. For example, before the project the participants were not encouraged to make their own decisions about what they observed – they just followed the developmental descriptors outlined in the EYFS and this created a sense of disempowerment. After taking part in the group discussions, the participants worked together in small groups and were more able to question their own practice and make decisions about the children's learning.

Within the context of the research project, the concept of power and empowerment are positioned within the social constructivist framework. Power and empowerment are defined as helping the participant to use and claim the powers available to them (Zimmerman, 1984). From this perspective, power and empowerment are viewed as being different for each participant. They are governed by the sociocultural and ecological context in which the participants interact and also as a collective knowledge base from which individual needs are addressed, and not from other sources of power.

In considering my relationship within the research project, it was useful for

me to draw on feminist research methodology, which specifically pays attention to how researchers' identities and subjectivities are located in the research process (Fawcett and Hearn, 2004:206). Aligning my thoughts and actions took time to get comfortable with. However, it helped me to understand what I brought to the process and how I influenced it. Deutsch (2004) and Fitzgerald (2004) suggest that reflexivity is central to the feminist methodology as it allows for the full examination of the researchers' methods, role, and relationships with participants and how their positionality affects the ongoing process.

It is usually assumed that the researcher has all the power (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012). But the participants also had the power to say what they really felt, or not, or to say what they thought I wanted to hear. I reflected on the effect of the power relations on my pre-understanding and openness about the research process, which led me to examine my own role as a researcher. It made me consider how these power dynamics played out in how I had engaged with the participants, and how I had understood their situation. The central issue of power for me was of how to manage my assumptions and interactions with the participants. This meant resisting my urge to teach 'best practice', sharing my expertise and experience, arguing why I think play is much more than a vehicle for learning, 'insisting' on shifts of thinking and practice in the interests of the children with whom they were working. The use of my reflexive journal throughout the process allowed me to critically examine and analyse the power differentials for any potential bias influencing the process.

Fonow & Cook (2005) argue that the process of being reflexive requires

the researcher to include themselves, and their emotional reactions, when writing about their research. My experiences seemed to match their view. For example, I had to engage with being both the subject and object of the research, as well as challenging the understanding of my role that I had taken for granted.

Within this project, empowerment of participants can be seen in how I supported the EYPs in the group discussion to question the reasons that underpinned their practice, resulting in them becoming more reflective and responsive to the children. Throughout the external moderator's report, the EYPs talk about their transformed relationships with children and each other. This gave me valuable insight into how the process of talking about knowledge and understanding with colleagues, and sharing their ideas, can increase the EYPs' sense of empowerment. In this regard, power and empowerment were dependent on how I interpreted the power and vulnerabilities of all participants' words and behaviour.

Clough and Nutbrown (2012:178) provide a useful methodological framework, in which they describe four forms of 'radical enquiry' as 'radical looking', 'radical listening', 'radical reading' and 'radical questioning'. 'Radical looking' relates to how the research process makes the familiar strange and gaps in knowledge are exposed (2012:52); 'radical listening' refers to the interpretive and critical ways in which the participant's voice is listened to (2012:63); 'radical reading' links with the justification for the critical task of taking on, or dismissing, existing knowledge and practices (2012:106); 'radical questioning' connects with the way in which 'the research process acknowledges gaps in knowledge and locates the researchers political

motivations' (2012:140).

From the start, the concept of 'radical looking' and 'radical listening' was critical and significant to my approach. One of my aims was to try to balance power by listening to the participants. I used the Froebelian technique of being internally active and externally passive, which had an impact on how I observed, listened to and empathised with the participants, leading to me to gear my support to their individual needs.

In 'radical looking', this meant rigorously questioning the assumptions that I had taken for granted in relation to what I was seeing, and minimising the impact of my personal bias or power influences on the study. Clough and Nutbrown's concept of 'radical listening' and giving voice to the research experience are both related to that of empowerment. Indeed, while they are similar concepts in many respects, the concept of 'radical listening' is particularly useful as it brings to notice the significance of my position and relationship within the research, as well as enhancing my aims.

Most importantly, the application of these concepts alerted and expanded my perception of the participant voice, leading to me listening more carefully. The process of 'radical looking' and 'radical listening' made me more self aware, in the sense that it provided theoretical clarity about giving voice to participants, which, in turn, led to a heightened awareness of my own motivations influencing the study.

The impact of personal impetus on methodological choices

I became aware of Interpretive Phenomenology Analysis (IPA) methodology

developed by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) while developing my research questions and seeking an approach that would enable me to argue and explore the issue of how EYPs perceive children's play. In fact, my original research question changed from *How might practitioners working in the Early Years take account of their own beliefs, values and interactions, when making analytical judgements about children's learning?* to *How might a group approach to supervision impact on EYPs' perceptions of their practice and understanding about children's learning?* This evolution was an important shift in my thinking. It encouraged me to be more concise and focus on the lived experience of the participants, rather than the aspects that influence observations.

I found IPA to be rather challenging at times. The in-depth rigorous case by case analysis was lengthy and time consuming but it provided me with a great deal of insight into the observational experiences of a group of four EYPs. Reducing my sample size from seven to four participants had the most impact, because it enabled me to capture the accounts of the shared group experience in more detail. This methodological approach enabled me to better grasp, listen to and understand the experiences of the participants.

While developing the semi-structured interview questions, it became clear that my experiences influenced the types of questions I asked. For example, at the start of the process, I was particularly interested in aspects that influence how EYPs observe children. IPA suggests that data collection bracketing allows the researcher to set aside her experiences and take a fresh perspective (Husserl, 1927 and Smith et al., 2009). To do this effectively, a colleague suggested that I reflect on this topic and write about

my own experiences, assumptions and biases as a bracketing exercise – although my personal belief is that it is not possible to bracket one's biases entirely. Before doing any data analysis, I looked again at the questions that I had written in my journal and pondered on them, left them for a couple of weeks, and then finally deliberated on my reflection. In order to suspend my assumptions, and adopt a more deliberate self-critical and reflective approach, I asked myself questions that were designed to be open to interpretation. I found that this process helped me to deepen my insight of the EYPs' observation practice.

IPA methodology requires close attention to the participants' words, particularly their voice. Through the process of asking difficult questions and remaining curious, I was able to examine the lived experience of the participants. In doing so, I identified a mix of extracts from the participants' own words supported by my interpretive comments that I chose to be included in the study. This meant carefully considering all of the data and looking for the voice of the participants. Clough and Nutbrown (2012:82) describe this process as 'radical listening' a stance 'which has the characteristics of honesty and integrity' and the fundamental purpose of which 'is faithful interpretation of what is heard'. Because IPA has an interpretive element, radical listening is an appropriate methodology to support the researcher in developing a coherent understanding of the participants' experience.

The reason for choice of literature

The primary reason that I selected the literature of Elfer (2014), Elfer (2013),

Page and Elfer (2003), Elfer (2012) and Elfer and Dearnley (2007) was that they use the psychodynamic concepts in their work and relate it to the early years. Their application of these ideas to Early Years has been influential in the training of EYPs in Continuing Professional Development (CPD).

I also chose literature on group consultation, such as Hanks (1985) and Farouk (2004), rather than on group work, for three reasons. The first was that I felt that I could engage in it by establishing links between these models of group consultation and the collaborative process as outlined by Vygotsky. My second reason was because of its effectiveness in helping teachers to change fundamental beliefs about their practice. Lastly, I selected literature on process consultations because of the principled approach and stages involved in the process directed at getting the participant to develop ownership of the problem being explored. This focus on development of accountability helped me to think about my own Zone of Proximal Development.

Ethical issues

The ethical issues in this study centred mainly on issues of protecting the participant from any further harm and discomfort, and ensuring that the participants did not become emotionally distressed. The issues of potentially vulnerable and less powerful participants were also considered.

I was mindful that during Elfer and Dearnley's (2007) Work Discussion Groups, some participants chose not to talk about children at all, but about their working relationships with colleagues and managers. I reflected upon whether it was empowering to allow them to do that, or whether it was a

failure in relation to the children with whom they work. Should Elfer and Dearnley have insisted that they focus on the children – given that they were facilitators of their discussions, not their managers? After careful consideration, I felt that my intentions for the intervention and the structure of the group meeting morally justified my research because it sought to empower the participants to develop new skills and this would affect how they engaged with children.

This type of group discussion was not without some initial risk for myself and the participants. For example, while the first session went like clockwork, the second session was a steep learning curve because one of the participants did not behave as expected and I was very aware that her analysis of her observation was in conflict with my own values. This presented an ethical challenge for me, and in how I dealt with it, to avoid my views clouding the integrity of the project.

On another occasion, I observed a participant become emotionally distressed during her presentation. I could hear the vulnerability in her voice and, while the session was meant to go on for an hour, I had to stop it after ten minutes because I became concerned about the long-term impact that this could have on the participant involved. My response to the participant was based on not just what I saw, but also what I felt and read from the situation.

Clough and Nutbrown (2012:99) argue that 'there is always an ethical problem surrounding issues of 'interpretation'. Just how does a researcher make sense of data derived from the voices of others?' Every researcher is presented with ethical questions in their studies. Elfer (2009) worked with

groups of nursery workers using the psychoanalytic concept of containment and transference. During this study, he arguably encountered a number of ethical issues as a result of his approach, for example, deciding whether or not to provide information that could be helpful to the participants' feelings, sense of security and understanding, at the same time as leaving space for their 'professional judgements and discretion' (Elfer, 2009:507). Certainly, in this study, I found that my own encounters with potentially vulnerable and less powerful participants meant that I had to interpret their words and behaviour and use my experience to decide what was best for them, as well as allowing space for them to make decisions for themselves.

The researcher's relationship with the data, including consideration of what counts as data

IPA requires the researcher to engage with detailed analysis of verbatim accounts of a small number of participants generally through semi-structured interviews (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). It also requires the researcher to rigorously explore each case in depth (Smith and Osborn, 2003). In keeping with this, I invested a significant amount of time, reading, re-reading, and doing a line-by-line analysis of each transcript. This process not only uncovered gaps in my knowledge but also how and why my particular responses might be morally and politically motivated. For example, the process of critiquing the verbatim accounts helped me to ensure that they stood up to scrutiny and that I was not being politically biased in the selection of voices that made it into the study (Cough and Nutbrown, 2012).

I felt that I knew the participants, in part because they were sharing their observations and insights with me, and also through the data analysis and the process of translating the themes into narrative accounts. I felt that I had inside knowledge about the participants' observational practice because we had a shared professional background. Throughout this process I critically considered my own interpretations, and the context of the participants that surrounded my research interest (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012).

Implications for interpretation of data

Before giving any meaning to the data, I considered it from the four participants' perspectives as a way of increasing my understanding of what the data meant for their observation practice. Revisiting my reflections helped me to become more aware of my assumptions and beliefs, as well as make links between the data and my interpretations. It is true to say that this process was challenging at times. At one point, I met with a group of Doctor of Education (EdD) students and asked them what they thought of the verbatim account of a question for one participant that had been troubling me. It was interesting to note the number of different interpretations of the same transcript. This proved to be a very useful exercise as, although it revealed some of what I expected, it also revealed new knowledge and insights.

The data interpretation was the most difficult aspect of this study, partly because it challenged my assumptions about the participants, particularly how I thought they should be. The interpretation process was not without challenges, particularly as I tried to put aside the assumptions that I brought

to the study. Being constantly reflexive throughout the process through my journal meant that I was able to reflect on how I had power in how I interpreted and categorised my data. This was the case when I began to identify themes and interpret how the participants were thinking about things.

The constant process of journaling also helped me to check whether my themes were accurate and if I was imposing my own value system. I recall wrestling with one of the superordinate themes, initially calling it Knowing What To Do, in which reluctance to engage in the process was a sub theme. After much reflection and discussion with my supervisors, this was changed to A Perceived Sense of Inadequacy, in which characteristics of how the participants perceived aspects of their work was analysed. This helped me to separate the participant role into own sub themes. Throughout the data interpretation, I asked myself, was I going after knowledge and data for whom, and for what purpose?

On a personal level, I wanted to make a contribution that was valued and ethical, that also kept the participants I was engaged with safe. I also wanted to bring the best out of them and produce a framework that would promote positive change. Indeed, reflecting on where I was coming from as a researcher helped me to acknowledge the issue of knowledge and power that I had.

Critically reflecting on these issues helped me to keep in mind my intent as a tool to ensure that, as I interpreted the data, I was critical, empathic and curious as a researcher.

Finally, in relation to my own Zone of Proximal Development, I came to realise that I needed help from others to validate the verbatim accounts of

the participants. As someone new to the application of IPA, I learnt about my own incremental learning. However, my development was dependent upon following the step-by-step guide outlined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). Even though the steps made perfect sense conceptually, at times I struggled to implement them and found it difficult to move from one case to another because of the need for me to bracket my understanding of each case, but at the same time use them as a source of insight.

I asked two of my colleagues to carry out their own analysis on two of the cases to help me check my interpretations. One of them pointed out that I should spend longer with each step of the analysis process before moving on to the next, in order to get to the micro-analysis of convergence and divergence within my data set. This advice proved to be invaluable as it allowed me to master and thoroughly develop my analytic skills. It also helped me to better understand my own learning. As I got more and more familiar with the steps, I came to realise that this method of analysis had initially been beyond my own Zone of Proximal Development.

Conclusion

I acknowledge that I cannot separate myself from the research process. I can only wish to see it from a new and different perspective. This chapter gives voice to my professional background as a researcher, my role and the significance of my relationships with participants, the literature, ethics and the data. These experiences form the landscape in which this thesis is based.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1: Professional context

The idea for this research stemmed from recurring conversations with nursery managers about how Early Years Practitioners needed support with their Observation, Assessment and Planning practice. This study aims to explore these issues at a deeper level. The research question asks: *How might a group approach to supervision impact on EYPs' perceptions of their practice and understanding about children's learning?*

At the time of the study I was working for a local authority (anonymised as Midtown) as an Early Years consultant. Managers from private, voluntary and independent (PVI) nurseries had raised concerns in relation to EYPs not being skilled at noticing when significant learning was taking place for the child. Consequently, these managers felt that their practitioners were unable to make appropriate professional judgements about how to support, extend or deepen the child's learning.

An important part of an Early Years Practitioner's role is carried out through the observation cycle of what they see, hear and take notice of. This is followed by analysis of these observations to gain insight into how children are learning. Planning for learning then takes place to provide developmentally appropriate experiences.

During my visits to PVI nurseries in Midtown, I noticed that, despite having OAP structures in place, many of the Early Years Practitioners were experiencing difficulty when it came to implementing the cycle effectively.

Over four years I came across several examples of observations in children's files being duplicated, which served to strengthen the managers' concerns that:

1. Many of their EYPs were unable to critically describe what they saw children doing, which impeded their ability to plan appropriate follow-up activities. Their observations omitted key issues and often simply restated the developmental descriptors outlined in Development Matters (EYFS, 2012). These observations provided a brief description of the child's activity, but, critically, did not include what the EYP thought about what they saw. If the EYP does not include their own interpretation of what they think about their observations, then they ignore a rich source of evidence about learning and development. This may also have an adverse impact on how effectively they support and extend learning.
2. When observations were scrutinised or challenged, the EYPs were unable to cite the observational evidence which made them come to a particular conclusion. The fact that these observations did not stand up to scrutiny raises questions about their validity. At the same time it highlights the importance of gathering meaningful observations that stand up to challenge.
3. Observations typically focus on a particular aspect of development, such as social and physical development. Yet the EYPs were unaware of the ways in which their personal bias may have influenced their view of the child. They were only looking at the

characteristics of the developmental descriptors, rather than gaining insight into how the children were learning. During a routine training session, I asked 20 participants to observe a video of a two-year-old by Siren Films (Two-Year-Olds Outdoors, Tristan clip, 2010). When describing what they saw, the majority of the group (70 per cent) focused on physical skills and some reported on the child's attachment to his mother. Only three members (15 per cent) of the group reported on the ideas and concepts that Tristan was developing, which suggests that the EYPs were weaker at noticing the complex connections between areas of learning and how the child was learning.

In addition to my observations, reports by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), which inspects all Early Years settings, showed that 45 per cent of the nurseries in my locality were considered 'inadequate'. According to these reports, EYPs in these settings lacked an adequate depth of understanding of learning and development requirements. Ofsted's (2014:10-11) definition of 'inadequate' in relation to OAP practice states: 'Planning is not effective in matching activities to children's needs. Observations and assessment are not consistent in quality and/or are not frequent or accurate enough to build on children's progress.'

All the available evidence appeared to suggest that many EYPs in Midtown were approaching the OAP process with only a vague understanding of what the children knew, understood or could do. They were not prepared for the ethical practice of gathering information about children. They lacked essential knowledge and skill and found themselves struggling.

These Ofsted reports highlight two concerns. Observations by EYPs do not form a key part of the planning cycle and EYPs lack essential knowledge to support and enhance learning.

1.2: The challenge of tuning into children

EYP observations are important. Not only are they the foundation of their understanding about children's explorations and learning, they are a vital tool in getting to know individual children. Once EYPs start to observe and track children's progress, identifying issues of concern becomes an integral part of the process.

Brodie (2015:22) states that carrying out observations is essentially a moral practice aimed at being aware of our own views, and looking at them through the lens of 'children's rights' to make sure that every child is respected, included and supported. However, the extent to which the observational practice of EYPs in Midtown matched Brodie's notion of ethical observation has serious implications for developing observational skills to more effectively meet the developmental needs of children.

Sadly, some Early Years Practitioners see observations as a 'chore' (Osgood 2012:127). This view is echoed by Wood and Attfield (2005:97), who propose that some EYPs may be more inclined to adopt a 'watching and waiting' approach to development and learning, that can be documented in order to match it to the prescribed outcomes of a child's progress. Wood and Attfield imply that such practices lack pedagogical interaction which can advance learning and development. Similarly, Drummond (2012:49) argues that some EYPs 'look for what they expect to see, at the expense of picking

up on the glimpses of unintentional learning that children may hint at in their play’.

These kinds of observations are not good for children because they do not seek to notice the detail of what the children are doing and saying, which is a vital part of understanding how to support their learning. Neither are they good for pedagogy, because they do not allow EYPs to do the thinking necessary to make adjustments, in their interactions or learning environment, to facilitate children's learning based on an understanding of their individual strengths, weaknesses and interests. Due to the centrality of observations within EYP practice, it is important that there is further investigation into how best to support EYPs in Midtown to develop the skills to do this morally and ethically.

1.3: Political context

Two reports by Field (2010:29-35) and Allen (2011:3-12) outline the Government vision and set out a new strategy for tackling child poverty at the earliest opportunity in the foundation years, through effective intervention with parents and families by the Early Years workforce. Early intervention to support children's readiness for school is highlighted as an important way to close the gap between those who achieve the expected levels of development at the end of the EYFS and those who do not. Both Field (2010) and Allen (2011) report on the impact of socio-economic disadvantages on young children and their life chances – thus giving rise to a national focus on

the concept of school readiness and early intervention as a way to close the gap between the highest and lowest-achieving children.

At the time of the study, the Government introduced the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in response to the results of a hegemonic discourse about developmentally-appropriate practices which stressed accountability, standardisation and measurement. Moss (2006) and House (2011) are among authors who have been highly critical of the excessive focus on outcomes, arguing for a broader theoretical viewpoint that includes multiple perspectives and different paradigmatic positions.

The Government commissioned Dame Clare Tickell (2011) to carry out an independent review of the Early Years Foundation Stage. It planned to drastically scale down the EYFS by reducing the complexity of what was being recorded, with more focus on making sure that children started school ready to learn.

Tickell's (2011:57-61) review made 46 recommendations proposing a radical simplification of the Early Years Foundation Stage framework. The Early Learning Goals (ELG) which EYPs check children's learning against were cut from 69 to 17, and a new progress check was introduced for two-year-olds along with supervision requirements aimed at developing practice. By simplifying this, it was hoped to reduce paperwork and bureaucracy.

The reformed EYFS was generally welcomed by some of the workforce due to its emphasis on increasing standards and its clear aim on school readiness. Amines (2011), managing director of the Bright Horizon nursery group, argued in support and said that the reduction in developmental descriptors would help EYPs focus on developing their understanding of how

children learn, giving them more time to observe and interact with them, rather than spending time on paperwork. However, it was also criticised. Moylett (2012:4) argued that omitting the characteristic of effective teaching and learning from the assessment process was likely to undermine, rather than enhance, EYPs' knowledge. I was deeply concerned that the reduction of the EYFS could make the situation in Midtown worse, particularly as the role of play in learning was greatly reduced in the reformed EYFS, and there was a risk that this would be open to interpretation.

Although it could be argued that it makes the EYFS more manageable, I was anxious that new or less confident EYPs may adopt a tunnel vision observational approach, only considering the early learning goals. This may not give them the necessary understanding of the connections and complexities involved in children's play. It felt like the policy on offer would reduce the amount of paperwork but, at the same time, reduce the impact of the importance of EYPs observing children in play. Hayward (2011), assistant director of Pen Green Research Base, echoes this concern. She claims that standardisation, increased accountability, and increased focus on prescribed goals, may have an adverse impact on EYPs who need further guidance. This may encourage EYPs to simply tick boxes, which will do little to stretch their understanding of the multi-faceted way in which children learn. She argues that these implications diminish the EYPs' autonomy in the decision-making process.

It is important to note that shortly after the Tickell Review (2011), Nutbrown (2012) carried out an independent review, commissioned by the Government, which looked at early education and childcare qualifications.

Her findings point to weaknesses in the sector, including the absence of observational skills as the foundation for understanding children's learning; lack of opportunity to reflect on and discuss observations; and lack of understanding about the job role (Nutbrown, 2012:17). Interestingly, the Nutbrown Review (2012) was commissioned after the Tickell Review's (2011) recommendations had begun to be implemented in nursery settings across the country. Nevertheless, the Nutbrown Review (2012) echoes the concerns raised by Midtown PVI managers that EYPs there had insufficient observational knowledge and skills. The implication here is that, in the absence of providing the EYPs with the support they need, they may be unsure of what is expected of them.

1.4: Professional knowledge base

The knowledge base and professional practice of Early Years Practitioners are two important factors in determining how and what children learn. This link between EYPs' knowledge and outcomes for children is highlighted by the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) research project (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart, 2004), which shows that the knowledge of EYPs is critical to the quality of experiences offered to children. They find that better outcomes for children are associated with higher qualifications of staff. This suggests that the quality of the setting depends upon the quality of the staff.

Reflecting on Nutbrown's findings draws me to the issue specific to Midtown. What becomes apparent is that the findings of the Nutbrown

Review (2012), as well as the concerns shared by managers in Midtown, suggested that the knowledge base and professional practice of EYPs in my locality was poor. The extent to which these issues were problematic in sustaining good practice was seen in how EYPs applied their knowledge to their practice, specifically in promoting and supporting children's future outcomes. Therefore, appropriate professional development for EYPs' knowledge and skills to aid understanding of development is vital (Manning-Morton, 2006).

However, the underlying assumption of current policy is that Early Years Practitioners have a deep understanding of child development and how children are progressing, and are confident to use this knowledge. The EYFS (2012:9) states that: 'Each area of learning and development must be implemented through planned, purposeful play and through a mix of adult-led and child-initiated activity.' To achieve this, EYPs need to be able to offer children a relevant curriculum which not only offers developmentally-appropriate learning experiences but also appropriate adult support and guidance.

Ongoing observations have a long history in Early Years (Isaacs, 1933). They are a vital component of effective pedagogical practice. Indeed, much of an EYP's knowledge of children comes, not only from their understanding of child development, but also their ability to interpret and understand a child's behaviour, as well as recognise when behaviour is meaningful. Thus, the ability to be able to make sense of what children are doing is a specific aspect of the EYPs' knowledge base.

Siraj-Blatchford (2010) argues that the national training framework for EYPs lacks coherence and should not be the only way to support their development of knowledge. She recognises that other steps must be taken to support EYPs. Nutbrown (2012:5) criticises the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) Level 3 for 'lacking depth and rigour' on issues related to pedagogical knowledge. It is worth mentioning that 84 per cent of the Early Years Practitioners in Midtown held either a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 2 or 3. The remaining 14 per cent held either a Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) or National Nursery Examination Board (NNEB) qualification. The situation in Midtown was of serious concern, given that the Tickell review may have misunderstood the context, and its recommendations may further exacerbate the identified problems and weaknesses concerning a lack of vital knowledge and skills among EYPs.

Let us consider the implications of having a training system that fails to provide EYPs with sufficient knowledge to do their job. The first of these is that the EYPs may not have practical experience of carrying out observations that are vital to ensuring the development of children. The second is that practical learning experience is traditionally gained during on-the-job training. However, some of the nursery settings where EYPs train may be inadequate themselves, suggesting that improvements are already needed. These implications highlight the more serious problem, which seems to be embedded within the design of the NVQ, and relates to how the acquisition of knowledge is seen as being passive – to fill EYPs with competencies rather than relating knowledge directly to their work. Coupled with the fact that most EYPs in Midtown had achieved an NVQ and that 45 per cent of the settings

were considered inadequate, addressing the issue of closing the gap between the highest and lowest achieving children becomes even harder to attain. Clearly, if we want to develop the knowledge of EYPs, so that they feel confident to meet the complex needs of children, training must be reformed to address the key issue of a deficit in skills.

The problem with education reform is that, often, policy-makers do not fully understand the competencies and technical knowledge required for the sector they are reforming. Both Urban (2008) and Moss (2013) say that voices from within the sector are hardly ever heard during policy formation. Consequently, education reform assumes confidence and high levels of understanding as standard. This not only has a distorting effect, but can also leave EYPs feeling that reform is being done to them, instead of with them. Such reforms may put a greater demand on EYPs' knowledge of child development. For example, the new required two-year-old progress check assumes that EYPs have a broad knowledge of this specific area of learning and how children learn, and also have pedagogical knowledge. Similarly, the assessment requirements assume that EYPs have relevant knowledge of the EYFS. To make these decisions, EYPs need to have knowledge of child development and understanding of the children's unique characteristics and interests. Developing EYPs' knowledge must therefore be key to successful reform.

Basford and Bath (2014:122) suggest that the policy discourse undermines the professional autonomy of EYPs: 'Reducing professional practice to clear, precise procedures, which can be measured, serves to limit professional autonomy; practitioners need to be able to respond in the

moment to whatever confronts them, feeling confident that they know what to do.'

As such, Basford and Bath view EYPs' own professional learning as integral to their day-to-day practice, asserting that its value comes from EYPs having opportunities to express their own judgements, instead of only following set procedures. By its nature then, professional autonomy arises spontaneously within the context of the EYPs' work where it is possible to exercise one's own judgements.

Admittedly, there are differences among EYPs' knowledge and skills. However, Basford and Bath's research raises serious questions about the lack of explicit engagement with pedagogy. There is general agreement amongst scholars that opportunities must be created for EYPs to reflect and talk about their work to improve their knowledge and understanding. Indeed, Nutbrown (2012), Robinson (2003), and Moyles, Adams and Musgrove (2002) argue that EYPs need regular opportunities to seek out the perspectives of others on what it is that children are doing, or to question what they understand about the child's learning. Manning-Morton (2006:47) argues that working with young children 'touches deeply-held personal values and often deeply-buried personal experiences, issues that are not able to be adequately addressed through standard, content-focused training'.

This implies that one's personal and professional knowledge and understanding of the world are inexplicably linked and reinforced by each other, often unconsciously. Thinking about children's learning is important but doing the thinking is difficult. In my work as an Early Years consultant I have found significant differences in the types of professional development

opportunities available to support EYPs' practice in relation to development of their personal and professional knowledge. Some managers develop these skills by putting EYPs on a one-day training course, whilst others just leave EYPs to get on with it. Many EYPs have reported that, not only are they not given space to think about their practice, but there is no one to discuss their OAP concerns with in a non-judgmental way – for example, their supervisor may also be the group room leader. Considering this, they remain unsupported but nonetheless active in determining children's outcomes.

It can be painful to confront one's own blind spots, prejudices, and sometimes negative feelings about children and their families. Indeed, the EYP's colleagues may show that they understand the problem better than the EYP does. Differences of professional opinion and judgements may also emerge, which can make the EYP's own emotional reactions uncomfortable to deal with. Therefore, the challenge in the sector is having time to reflect and deal with the consequences – these are two strategies which settings could embed into the culture of the organisation.

1.5: Why supervision matters

Good supervision can help to improve EYPs' professional practice with young children. The EYFS states that the provider:

... must put appropriate arrangements in place for the supervision of staff who have contact with children and families. Effective supervision provides support, coaching and training for the practitioner and promotes the interests of children (DfE 2012:17).

The EYFS supervision requirements are seen as a positive step towards providing support in relation to the needs and learning of EYPs. Elfer (2014) claims that these requirements are important in enabling EYPs 'to think about emotions that are evoked in working closely with young children, and how they affect our work'.

This is borne out by Hawkins and Shohet (2012), who state that supervision is vital to professions where the role is to observe and attend to someone else's needs, and where anxiety, feelings of failure and being emotionally drained are encountered. Both authors suggest that supervision plays a vital role in the EYPs' work. The implication is that the well-being of the EYP may affect the children he or she cares for.

Although I was initially pleased to see new requirements for supervision aimed at facilitating Early Years Practitioners to develop knowledge, this eventually became an ongoing challenge. Further conversations with the managers in Midtown revealed that some of them were prioritising managerial needs over development needs. Many of them were inexperienced, as this requirement for supervision was not in place in the previous policy, and some felt daunted by the task of positively challenging previously accepted practices. However, even experienced managers tended to focus on regulations of practice rather than creating a space for thinking and talking about ensuring that EYPs received feedback on both managerial tasks and practice. In light of a lack of a coherent approach in introducing the supervision requirements, the managers went about it without considering how their own knowledge might impact on their ability to offer EYPs targeted support. This method of supervision is not so much wrong, but rather

inconsistent with Tickell's concept. This shows two things – that the quality of supervision depends upon the supervisor's knowledge of supervision and that the EYPs undoubtedly need guidance to effectively support them to develop their skills. I felt that the situation was made worse by a lack of supervision guidance from the Government and I began to consider how best I could support the EYPs to develop their practice.

It is notable that supervision had not been commonly used by the sector before the introduction of the EYFS (2012). As a term, the concept of supervision is not neutral – it can be associated with performance and the sense of someone looking over your shoulder, or it can be seen rather more positively as part of the development of skills and understanding. According to Steel (2001), supervision can reduce stress and anxiety in some circumstances – but she warns that it can also easily isolate people, notably those suspicious of the process. The challenge of implementing supervision in Early Years settings can be further understood in light of what Soni (2014) describes as EYPs not receiving the kinds of supervision where their strength and emotional needs are recognised. Elfer (2012) claims that supervision is an inherently positive practice. He argues that it has two functions – to examine the connection between theory and practice and to emotionally contain and support the stress and anxieties regarding EYPs' attachments with young children. Both emphasise the way in which supervision can help practitioners.

Tickell (2011:46) also highlights the dual aspects of supervision, as both a performance and development tool. She describes how supervision should be implemented to encourage reflective practice and should not just be used

as a tool to scrutinise performance. Yet her view of supervision appears to have been distorted by government in how it has been implemented. Ofsted inspections tend to use the new supervision requirements as an accountability measure, rather than a space in which EYPs have access to managerial and supportive functions of supervision. Youell (2005) suggests that education inspections in the United Kingdom are characterised by the use of public shaming if nurseries and schools do not comply with statutory process and procedures. Consequently, EYPs fear Ofsted and feel restricted rather than empowered.

Much less emphasis during Ofsted inspections is placed on a reflective space for EYPs and there is more focus on check lists of whether EYPs are conforming to regulatory expectations. Whilst this is fine in relation to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children, with pedagogy this approach has serious risks. It fails to promote a holistic approach to supervision that is underpinned by a combination of performance and development. The implications of this are that EYPs may miss important developmental indicators resulting in children becoming bored and not making progress in their learning or skills.

How individual managers in Midtown managed the duality of performance and development was problematic. It is not merely a matter of implementing the processes but involves the individual's beliefs about supervision. Elfer and Dearnley (2007), and Elfer (2014), argue that individual beliefs, personal agendas and qualities influence how supervision is put into practice, whether implicitly or explicitly. According to Manning-Morton (2006), these beliefs also

have an impact on how the manager responds to requests from EYPs for further support.

One of the major issues in Midtown surrounded the culture of the nursery and its commitment to ensuring that supervision took place. Indeed, Elfer and Dearnley (2007) claim that the culture of a nursery setting has a major influence on promoting or hindering supervision practice, arguing that professional development needs to be valued and embedded across the organisation. Elfer and Dearnley propose that it is the organisational culture that sets the scene for the types of support given during supervision.

Another difficulty relates to the lack of availability of professional supervision training for managers. As an Early Years consultant, my primary role is to support teaching and learning. Whilst the debate about supervision guidance continues to be important, the scope of my research was much narrower. It was about supporting a group of EYPs from a single setting to develop and sustain their OAP practice.

In many respects the primary aim of the supervision process in Early Years is to offer EYPs support to improve their practice towards the goal of better outcomes for children, according to Soni (2014). To achieve the goal of effective supervision in Early Years, other efforts must be geared towards overcoming the challenges of implementing the supervision identified above.

Group interventions are one form of supervision where EYPs can think about their relationships with children and how to use these to support learning. Hawkins and Shohet (2012) note the potential benefits of group supervision when they argue that, unlike one-to-one supervision, the group enables staff to learn from each other through sharing similar issues and

concerns. One of the potential benefits is that EYPs are exposed to a range of different viewpoints and opinions.

In summary, the implementation of the reformed EYFS left me facing a serious professional challenge – how could I meaningfully support EYPs to develop their knowledge base and link it to children's learning? It also left me questioning whether it would be possible to use a form of group supervision to develop practice in relation to OAP. Funding cuts in Midtown had already started to affect the level of support I could provide to PVI nurseries. It was not possible for my locality to provide any additional funding for my intervention. Instead I was allowed to take five additional study days.

1.6: Research approach: Model of group supervision

Traditionally, Vygotsky's (1978) concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) has been applied to children in education settings. He uses ZPD to describe the development which a learner can achieve independently and with guidance. I looked through literature but could not find anyone who had applied Vygotsky's concept of ZPD to adults – although I have had several discussions with colleagues and education psychologists, who agree that ZPD can be applied to learning situations, not just for children but for adults as well. Interestingly, Zuckerman (2007:51) states that:

'For adults, the task of constructing a meeting with the child on the territory of play, learning activity, or directly emotional or intimate personal communication is always a new task, however experienced the adult may be in solving similar tasks. The task is new for the adult for he is seeking for the first time a method of adjusting his action to

the action of this specific child in such a way that something new should arise at the place where the two actions meet’.

In other words, these are situations in which both participants are creating the Zone of Proximal Development for each other. Zuckerman seems to imply that such a meeting with a child always demands that a teacher act in the zone of their own proximal development.

I wanted to expand Vygotsky’s ZPD to include EYP-to-EYP collaboration, as a vehicle of continuing professional development of OAP skills. Starting from a Vygotskyian perspective, I present a particular form of Continuing Professional Development (CPD), which draws heavily upon Vygotsky’s ideas. It is also influenced by several models of group and process consultation; Schein’s (1987) ideas about effective communication and the development of interpersonal skills; and the centrality given to the educative aspect of group supervision taken by Hanko (1999), which is explored in more detail in my literature review.

In many respects Vygotsky places much emphasis on the role of a collective society in sharing knowledge and skills. According to Vygotsky (1978), many of the discoveries which learners make happen in collaborative dialogue with a skilful tutor. Vygotsky claims that students learn more effectively when working together with others – it is through such collaboration with more experienced others that students learn to internalise new concepts. Vygotsky (1978:86) defines the Zone of Proximal Development as ‘the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential

development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers’.

In Vygotsky’s view, collaborative learning is more likely to occur within the learner’s ZPD and guidance should be targeted there. He sees development and learning as being influenced by dialogue and discussion with others in a social context. In his view, working together with peers in collaborative social situations gives the learner sufficient chance to observe and develop their performance, which they would not benefit from alone. Chaiklin (2003) explains that collaborative endeavours are not only about the adult being more knowledgeable than the student, but are also about the adult’s understanding of the student’s thinking. Chaiklin (2003:11) argues that the term ‘collaboration’ relates to situations where the learner is offered some interaction with another person in relation to the problem being solved.

I used the ZPD as a guide to determine the gap between the expected level of skill and knowledge as put forward by the Tickell Review (2011) and the actual practice of the participant, to determine what support was needed. I also wanted the participants to engage in recall, reflection, pair and group discussions to deepen their understanding of observation and implementation. Managers in Midtown had identified significant gaps in the EYPs’ knowledge of the OAP process. The significance of the gap in Midtown between what was expected and actual practice justified the need for a more sensitive approach than the official one of supporting the EYPs’ development and needs.

I set out with the assumption that professional development has to be meaningful for Early Years Practitioners and supportive of their development

and practice for it to be truly effective. Two elements needed to form part of my support, subjectivity, which describes the process of where the EYPs begin with different understanding and experiences, and intersubjectivity, which explores the interactions that take place during the collaborative problem process.

1.7: Group interventions in Early Years settings

There is very little reported research into group consultation with nursery staff. Jackson's (2008) research on the development of work group discussions in secondary schools is the closest comparable study. Research has instead tended to focus on the individual support of teachers. One exception is the work of Hopkins (1988), a therapist working at the Tavistock Clinic in London, who believes that some practices in nurseries are harmful to children. Hopkins' (1998) research highlights that providing Early Years Practitioners with a secure group space to explore their thoughts and feelings about specific practice will allow them to develop understanding. Two key characteristics of Hopkins' approach are that no teaching of any kind takes place and opportunities to talk about practice are encouraged. She argues that these characteristics are important because they allow the participants' own fears and anxieties to emerge and be explored.

Manning-Morton's (2006:50) model of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) focuses on 'relationship-based learning'. Manning-Morton encourages personal reflection of practice and theoretical thinking, which enable the EYPs to develop both their practice and their professional

identities. One of the key features of Manning-Morton's approach is the focus on personal and professional reflection. Elfer and Dearnley (2007) promote an approach to CPD that is both didactic and interactive. Working with a group of 12 nursery heads, they explored the emotional challenges of their work and how the key person approach translated in practice. The nursery heads were encouraged to reflect on their feelings, enabling them to be more considerate about themselves and how they assisted their staff to support children's emotional needs. Two key features of this model are that the heads are encouraged to learn from experience and are provided with a reflective space.

While these studies clarify the importance of engagement with emotional aspects of the role, they also indicate that EYPs start to notice children who were previously under the radar (Elfer & Dearnley, 2007) – this could potentially change how they observe children. These studies highlight a gap for an approach to support EYPs to develop professional learning. Finally, the findings of these studies also suggest that providing space for EYPs to reflect on OAP skills in small group supervision sessions may help them to develop their understanding and practice, improving outcomes for children.

1.8: Structure

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 presents the theoretical underpinnings of this research in a critical literature review, which assesses the strengths and weaknesses of the key concepts and debates in this field.

Chapter 2: Literature review

Introduction

Group consultation approaches which help teachers to develop their professional practice have been used effectively in schools. I draw upon various theoretical approaches to establish links between Vygotsky's theoretical frameworks and group consultation processes.

2.1: Vygotsky's social constructivist perspective

Vygotsky's (1978) theory is based on the idea that human beings develop intellectually independent cultural characteristics by joining in cultural activities and then internalising the meanings of that activity. This process is founded on the notion that culture produces mediated means which represent internalised meaning and allow the individual to behave in culturally relevant ways.

In elaborating his theory, Vygotsky claims that individuals are capable of functioning at higher intellectual levels when they work collaboratively rather than individually. Vygotsky is concerned with the interaction between learners during joint activity – he states that 'every function in the child's cultural development appears twice, first on a social level and later on an individual level, first between people and then inside the child' (1978:57). This definition implies that the higher functions start off as the relationship between learners.

From this perspective, learning is a social process that involves receiving guidance and/or support from a more knowledgeable other, who has a better understanding or a higher ability level than the learner in respect to a particular task, process or concept. Language is identified as an important cultural tool which serves to move learning from the social to the individual level.

Vygotsky considers the role of the adult to be vital in guiding the learners in tasks which are just ahead of their current ability. With such guidance, he asserts, the learner can function ahead of their own capacity. Vygotsky uses the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development to define the distance between the learner's ability to perform a task under adult guidance, and/or peer collaboration, and the learner's ability to solve the problem independently. This definition of the ZPD suggests that guidance should be directed at supporting maturing functions rather than functions which the learners have already achieved.

Another aspect of Vygotsky's theory considers joint understanding as central in developing higher levels of thinking. Vygotsky (1978:87) highlights the importance of a shared dialogue in collaborative activities in enhancing learning. He states that learners can 'perform...in collaboration with one other that which they have not mastered independently'. He also asserts that collaboration brings about a shared understanding of the problem as a result of the learner, and more knowledgeable other, taking account of each other's perspective.

2.2: The implications of Vygotsky's constructivist theory on group consultation processes

Caplan (1970) defines consultation as 'a process of interaction between two professional persons – the consultant, who is a specialist, and the consultee, who invokes the consultant's help regarding a current work problem, which he or she has decided is within the other's area of specialized competence'.

This definition implies that consultation is both a collaborative and directed process, a process that involves learning on the part of the learner and the group facilitator. Ideally, the learner develops in areas where there have previously been difficulties and the facilitator learns about the level of support needed by the pupil. Vygotsky (1978) offers a powerful theoretical framework in which the role of culture and social learning is viewed as a central tenet.

According to Vygotsky, learning is an active process which involves the pupil being actively engaged in the process. Knowledge cannot merely be transferred, but is constructed through joint meaningful activity. This aspect of his theory can be seen to relate to both the group facilitator (consultant) and learner (consultee), as both will develop new knowledge and understanding of the issues being explored.

Another aspect of Vygotsky's theory which can be translated to group consultation is that of joint understanding. Vygotsky views language and dialogue as one of many cultural tools for enhancing learning. Vygotsky's problem-solving approach establishes important links between collaborative dialogue in group consultations and collaborative problem-solving between learners (Caplan, 1970). Indeed, both approaches provide opportunities for the learner to listen to the perspective of others as they reflect on their

practice. This link between problem-solving and group consultation is further articulated by the importance placed on problem-solving in both approaches.

Another critical aspect is Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, which emphasises how the learner learns from others when engaging in collaborative activities. This could also relate to the thoughtful interactions during the group consultation process between the facilitator and the learners.

2.3: Problem-solving approaches to group consultation

Definitions of group consultation tend to focus upon the type of intervention needed to support the situation. Caplan (1970) developed a model of Mental Health Consultation with a number of overlapping features:

- Client-centred case consultation
- Consultee-centred case consultation
- Programme-centred administrative consultation
- Consultee-centred administrative consultation

He recommends that the consultee-centred model should be offered to professionals with a psychodynamic approach, which utilises the need for collaborative dialogue to bring about reflection. The aim of this approach is to give professionals a space to discuss problems with a consultant, paying close attention to what others in the group say, and reflect on their practice. He argues that this process increases self-awareness and knowledge among professionals of possible solutions which exist for addressing the problem.

This is echoed by Schon (1983), who views reflection as a way of supporting teachers to develop their practice. The literature suggests that the reflective process can help professionals engage in developing knowledge, skills and understanding and establishes a link with Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development. This link indicates the relationship between the consultant and consultee, the consultant's understanding of the consultee's difficulty, and their ability to help the consultee learn. The link is made more explicit by the collaborative problem-solving process between professionals.

Hanko (1999) promotes a psychodynamic and systemic thinking approach which gives priority to collaborative relationships between the consultant, group and school. Hanko's (1999:9) definition of the consultant's role differs from Caplan (1970), as Hanko's (1999:9) view is that consultants should not present as experts – rather, they should act as 'a non-directive facilitating fellow professional skilled in the art of sharing his experience and expertise in a process of joint exploration of a problem'.

Hanko's approach aims to ask teachers thoughtful 'answerable questions' about the difficulties they are experiencing. Hanko (1999:61) claims that the collaborative process allows the teachers to advance their knowledge and skills and is therefore able to reinstate a sense of 'objectivity' to the situation. Bozic and Carter (2002) and Farouk (2004) argue that Hanko's view does not accommodate the teacher's personal agenda, bias and emotional needs and, as such, affects the successful functioning of the group. Both Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner (1979) recognise that these factors play a crucial role in human development. Bronfenbrenner identifies four interacting systems which he claims have an influence on children's interaction and relationships.

He presents these as a framework of interacting forces for understanding how individual or group processes are affected by environmental systems in which they function.

- The **Microsystem** relates to indirect and direct interpersonal relationships with the child.
- The **Mesosystem** relates to the connections between the relationships of the child's microsystems.
- The **Exosystem** is concerned with the structures which the child does not have direct contact with, but is influenced by (policy and practice).
- The **Macrosystem** is influenced by culture and child-rearing traditions and beliefs.

Vygotsky's ZPD considers the role of relationships in the child's microsystem. Here the microsystem represents the social and cultural factors and emphasises the role of the adult. He argues that interaction is beneficial to the learner when another, who knows more about the task, assists them. The more knowledgeable other benefits too, as the process of collaboration helps to bring about a sense of objectivity about what is known. This last point relates to Hanko's claim that collaboration enhances learning and can enable interpersonal experiences to be transformed into intrapersonal competence. My approach builds on Hanko's by asking EYPs a series of thoughtful questions which focus them on their observations.

Farouk (2004) outlines a four-stage solution-focused approach, based on

combining the ideas from Hanko and Schein's (1987) Process Consultation model (see 2.7 below). Farouk's approach is geared at providing opportunities for teachers to reflect on and develop their personal ideas and support practice through generating new strategies. Farouk reports several advantages – teachers are given space to reflect on their interactions with the children. They feel that they gain a deeper understanding of the children's needs, and that they can better support children in achieving goals. Farouk's approach resonates with Vygotsky's assumptions that the learner's development can only be understood in the social context, thus, interpersonal factors should not be separated from that context.

Wilson and Newton (2006) developed a ten-stage process called Circles of Adults (CoA), which incorporates group consultation with graphic facilitation. This approach draws heavily from that of Hanko's described earlier. According to Wilson and Newton, CoA processes have five main aims. These are:

- Collective problem-solving
- Reflection
- An examination of the effect of organisational factors
- Emotional support
- Group feedback

Wilson and Newton's approach aims to support adults working with children who have emotionally-challenging behaviour. The aim is to develop a deeper understanding of a child or young person and to develop a set of

hypotheses and up-and-coming strategies which better contain unmet learning and emotional needs. However, Bennett and Monsen (2011) criticise this approach as lacking in evaluation of interventions and strategies. Nonetheless, they assert that the structure is easy to access and the materials may support possible group problem-solving processes.

2.4: Benefits and weaknesses of group consultation

The preceding literature offers insight into group consultation and the different processes which consultants focus on as a tool to enhance professional development.

Caplan's (1970) approach has been particularly influential – many scholars have drawn on his psychodynamic model for their work with school-based consultations. Perhaps the most important aspect of this model is that it seeks to improve job performance, with a principal focus on helping clients to gain insight as to how their personal feelings and behaviour may contribute to the presenting issues. Thus, the main aim of the consultant is to improve the clients' understanding of the difficult work issues and to increase their capacity to deal with future reoccurring issues.

A limitation rather than a weakness is that this consultation model has perhaps advanced beyond Caplan's original conceptualisation. Factors such as Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecology theory and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of development (i.e. the Zone of Proximal Development) – which are widely used in education – might offer consultants an alternative perspective, since they seek to understand the interactions between the

individual and their environment. In my opinion, Caplan pays little attention to the socio-economic and political factors that may well contribute to an individual's ability to develop high mental functions.

Similarly, Hanks's (1999) approach gives little or no consideration to a school's culture or, indeed, the interactions that arise within a group (Farouk, 2004). However, its major strength is that it can help teachers to change fundamental beliefs about their practice, by providing a space for reflective dialogue and discussion, where teachers feel that they have support and guidance. This last point establishes links with Vygotsky's claim that the construction of a shared language supports learning.

Farouk's (2004) model combines group consultation with process consultation in order to attend to emotional and interpersonal factors. Like Vygotsky, Farouk considers the culture of the group, and personal characteristics of the participants, that could affect its dynamics. Perhaps this also shows how Vygotsky's constructivist frameworks might offer group consultation a more coherent approach.

Wilson and Newton's (2006) approach incorporates psychodynamics with group supervision and recognises the important role that group dynamics have. This approach considers the importance of both reflection and feedback, while also recognising the effect of group dynamics. Vygotsky recognises social and cultural factors may influence collaborative learning which, in turn, may influence learning at an individual level.

2.5: Psychoanalytic approaches

Bain and Barnett's (1986) approach is based upon psychoanalytic theory and the social defences which organisations construct against emotional attachment to children. This is a highly particular model of 'work discussion' and the first to offer support to nursery nurses (EYPs). It centres on facilitating the development of relationships between EYPs and children, offering them weekly group sessions to talk about their relationships and experiences with young children. Bain and Barnett report that the 'work discussions' help staff to recognise their own feelings of inadequacy, struggle, and dislike of particular children. Elfer (2014:108) argues that the aim of this group is for participants to learn from 'rigorous discussion of experience' with facilitators to achieve careful exploration of difficult issues.

Hopkins (1988) promotes an approach which advocates no teaching of any kind. This aims to provide support to EYPs through 'work discussions', in which they can express their personal and professional views about their attachment relationships with children. Facilitators attend to the unconscious feelings and anxieties of the group. Trained therapists predominantly use this model. These kinds of CPD groups have been criticised by teachers for failing to offer an immediate solution about how they should be working (Jackson, 2002). The argument of Manning-Morton (2006), that Early Years Practitioners need professional reflection time which allows them to consider personal emotions in their professional practice, points to the potential benefits of 'work discussions' in supporting this.

Elfer and Dearnley (2007) propose a particular model of support as a form of professional supervision, based upon psychoanalytic theory with a group

of 12 nursery heads. Elfer and Dearnley (2007:268) draw on the concept of 'social defence systems' to explain the defence strategies which EYPs may use when certain aspects of their work become too emotionally difficult to deal with. Elfer and Dearnley's approach aims to offer facilitated support, in which attachment relationships and the emotional aspect of teaching and learning can be more thoughtfully explored and delicately challenged. Elfer and Dearnley report many positive benefits and outcomes – the heads value being able to discuss and share experiences, becoming more aware of what is happening in their nurseries. The heads also report increased interaction and feel listened to and supported. One of the key aspects of this approach is the opportunity for EYPs to discuss and think about how they respond to the emotional demands of children. The concept of 'work discussions' is directly linked to intersubjectivity between the participants and the facilitator and between the participants themselves and Vygotsky's notion of receiving help from a more knowledgeable other.

Subsequent research by Elfer (2012) and Page and Elfer (2013) advances Elfer and Dearnley's (2007) emphasis on 'work discussions' as a tool for supporting the challenges encountered by Early Years Practitioners as they engage with the emotions of young children. The aim of the 'work discussions' is to support managers to critically reflect on their own emotional experiences. The facilitator does not decide what is discussed, but keeps the 'work discussions' on task. Elfer (2012) reports that those taking part indicate that their participation allows them to engage with their emotional responses and become more aware of the emotional context of their management experience. This leads some of them to report feelings of guilt. Elfer argues

that EYPs 'should have an opportunity to talk through the emotional demands of such work'. Davis and Ryder (2016:133) acknowledge that reflective discussions are a fundamental aspect of the manager's role. However, they warn that this type of work discussion relies completely on trust being established within the group and some settings may need to address this issue first.

2.6: Benefits and weaknesses of psychoanalytic approach

The work discussions approach is highly influenced by psychoanalytic insights and places a strong emphasis on providing EYPs with time to explore the emotive aspects of their role. Whilst Bain and Barnett's (1980) approach is pioneering in working with EYPs, it is costly to administer, which may discourage some PVI settings from using it. Despite this, the work of Bain and Barnett (1980), Hopkins (1988) and Elfer and Dearnley (2007) continues to inform the key person approach utilised in England's EYFS. Work discussion is used in professional support with trained facilitators and the advantages include:

- Change of perception (Bain & Barnett, 1986).
- Becoming more aware of children's individual needs (Bain & Barnett, 1986; Hopkins, 1988; Elfer & Dearnley, 2007; Elfer, 2012).
- Thoughtful observations (Hopkins, 1988; Elfer & Dearnley, 2007; Elfer, 2012).
- More responsive to the children (Bain & Barnett, 1986; Hopkins, 1988; Elfer & Dearnley, 2007; Elfer, 2012).

- More able to deal with children's difficult emotions (Bain & Barnett, 1986; Hopkins, 1988; Elfer & Dearnley, 2007; Elfer, 2012).
- Valuing the CPD and valuing being able to discuss and share experiences (Bain & Barnett, 1986; Hopkins, 1988; Elfer & Dearnley, 2007; Elfer, 2012).
- Becoming more aware of what is happening in their nurseries (Bain & Barnett, 1986; Elfer, 2012).
- Increased interaction (Elfer & Dearnley, 2007).
- Opportunity for reflection (Elfer & Dearnley, 2007; Elfer, 2012).
- Listened to and supported (Elfer & Dearnley, 2007; Elfer, 2012).

Negative impacts reported are:

- Not enough time allocated for group members to become more familiar with each other (Elfer, 2012).
- Initial feelings of anxiety about the model of CPD and that some group members do not participate (Hopkins, 1988; Elfer & Dearnley, 2007; Elfer, 2012).

2.7: Process consultation

Schein (1987) describes a model of Process Consultation (PC) to assist organisations in making changes. He defines this approach as 'a set of activities on the part of the consultant that helps the client to perceive, understand and act upon the process events that occur in the client's environment in order to improve the situation as defined by the client'

(Schein, 1987:11). This approach is concerned with problem-solving and supporting the consultee to find related appropriate solutions to difficulties encountered. The main aim is for the consultant to reveal the client's thinking and facilitate decision-making processes. This allows the consultee to take ownership of the problem to bring about change.

This is echoed by the argument of Reddy (1994), that the consultant should intervene no more than is necessary to meet the client's goals. Schein advocates active engagement on the side of the client which, he argues, is one of the main mechanisms to help them become more skilled in interpersonal communication and reaching their desired goal. This links to Vygotsky's (1978) assertion that members of an organisation can learn and change their behaviour based on support that they receive from others, thus moving beyond their current capability, while still being within their potential (i.e. the Zone of Proximal Development).

Manning-Morton (2006) explains 'process-oriented' (as a form of professional learning) to be based upon 'andragogical problem base and collaborative perspective to adult learning', used to explain the importance of self-knowledge. This approach aims to support the Early Years Practitioners' relationships with young children and is intended to promote their professional identity by encouraging critical reflection about the impact of their personal beliefs on their practice.

2.8: Benefits and weaknesses of process consultation

Schein's (1987) Process Consultation model pays attention to the

development of the client's identity and interactions and includes external factors which may affect the client's involvement in the process. The strength of this approach is the process of collaboration. This is essential to finding solutions, leading to the development of shared values and increased levels of self, and group, responsibility.

Schein's approach is also both remedial and preventive, in that it seeks not to give out solutions, but to develop the client's problem-solving skills. As far as weakness is concerned, his approach is dependent on an individual consultant's ability to reflect on his or her own behaviour – to know if they are giving clients solutions or supporting them to find their own solutions. Despite the weaknesses, PC consultants try to give insight into 'process events' (Schein, 1987:11).

Manning-Morton's (2006) approach has a strong evidence-based practice theory underpinning it. Manning-Morton (2006:44) claims that her model has led to 'increased professional self-confidence, with respect to articulating their practice philosophy'.

It should be recognised, however, that the commitment needed from participants may hinder its use in some settings. Despite this, the model provides further emphasis on the importance of reflecting on personal emotions in professional practice, underpinned by a process-orientated approach to bring about changes.

2.9: My approach

Here I refer to my model as the Group Intervention (GI). An EYP presents two or three observations of the same child to the group. These observations are gathered across a selection of activities. At this point, only the presenting EYP is encouraged by the group facilitator to share his or her insights about how the child is learning. Then all of the EYPs look at the video footage together.

Next, the EYPs are asked to work in pairs where they are guided to reflect on and analyse what, for them, is new or different in relation to what the presenting EYP has noticed. This creates opportunities for a professional dialogue between them. Each pair then gives a collaborative feedback of their understanding to the wider group. During this stage the group facilitator asks a series of questions such as:

- What makes you say that?
- How much, and how well, do you think the child is learning?
- How do you think a change in the learning environment would support and extend learning?
- How could your interaction and support extend learning?

Following this exploration, each pair joins another pair, where they have a further discussion so that they can begin to make decisions about how best to support and extend learning. It is noted that these discussions seek to go beyond the EYPs' Zone of Proximal Development. Next, the whole group come together to discuss their ideas. The focus is on sharing of perspectives,

ideas, and feedback for the presenting EYP. The facilitator then summarises the feedback and raises questions in need of further exploration. The subsequent discussion involves the whole group, who review their hypotheses about the children in light of their planning and make plans for the children's next steps in learning.

The model of Group Intervention I have developed aims to help EYPs in five ways. It seeks to provide sensitive support, allowing a space for anxiety, uncertainty and low self-confidence amongst EYPs; encourages EYPs to share their concerns and receive feedback; allows the EYPs to learn from each other; empowers the EYPs to increase their participation; and provides the EYPs with an ongoing sense of support within a team.

The central aim is to enable the EYPs to gain multiple perspectives about their own and other people's practice by facilitating a culture of trust, open reflection and learning. There is an obvious symmetry here between what is expected of the Early Years Practitioners in relation to the children – for example, to be thoughtful about the children's ideas – and what is expected of the facilitator in relation to the EYPs, i.e. to be thoughtful about their ideas, concerns and anxieties. The Group Intervention seeks to raise an individual pedagogical awareness of practice which might otherwise go unnoticed.

2.10: The facilitator's role within the Group Intervention

The facilitator's role in the Group Intervention is one of purposeful guidance, enabling the participants to reach their own Zone of Proximal Development. The group structure is designed to move the participants towards higher

levels of competence and understanding. The pair and group discussions provide an opportunity for the EYPs to discuss their learning with others. This results in questions being asked by group members, which promote a deeper understanding of the problem. During this process the facilitator will ask a series of questions to separate what is known, extend the thinking of the participants further, and provide opportunities for reflective dialogue between pairs. This whole process serves as a form of thoughtful 'scaffolding' which guides the group to think about the problem in a new way.

According to Vygotsky, problem-solving must be under the guidance of a more knowledgeable other. In the discussions, the facilitator may scaffold a problem by relating it back to what is already known by the participant and assessing the skills required to solve the problem; offer meaningful tools (feedback) for the participant to work with; and providing support while enabling the participant to find a solution. The other members of the group can also provide scaffolding support. Scaffolding is an interactive process that requires the facilitator to review, support and be thoughtful to the participant's needs as a learner.

2.11: Conclusion

This review of literature suggests that consultation, 'work discussions', or group supervision have the potential of supporting and developing EYPs' professional practice. I have argued that the Vygotskyian theoretical framework offers a complementary perspective which can be used by all the theoretical approaches. With so much emphasis on collaboration and

interaction within the group consultation and work discussion approaches, it becomes evident that links are established with Vygotsky's notion of joint activity, which also seeks to build on the learner's own understanding.

However, Process Consultation, by the very nature of its focus on the development of the interactions between consultant and client, lends itself to be applied to a Vygotsky theoretical framework. Facilitating Early Years Practitioners to develop their knowledge within a group context is particularly important, given that this can lead to EYPs becoming more thoughtful about their practice (Manning-Morton, 2006; Elfer, 2014). This research seeks to explore Early Years Practitioners' practice and perceptions of children's learning. It aims to answer the question: *How might a group approach to supervision impact on EYPs' perceived ideas about their practice and understanding about children's learning?*

In the following chapter I discuss the methodology chosen to answer this question and the procedures used within the research.

Chapter 3: Research methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore how a group approach to supervision might impact on EYPs' perceptions of their practice and understanding about children's learning.

This chapter begins with my rationale for the research, followed by an overview of the philosophical assumptions underpinning this research, including my ontological and epistemological assumptions. It also includes my choice of methodological approach and discussion surrounding the research methodology. This includes a discussion about Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research and process; rationale for choosing IPA; limitations of IPA; qualitative approaches and the conceptual framework, together with the ethical considerations and issues of credibility; overview of research design; and reflectivity.

3.1: Rationale for research

A need for support for Early Years Practitioners is highlighted in the Nutbrown Review: 'Our present qualifications system does not always equip practitioners with the knowledge and experience necessary for them to offer children high quality care and education, and to support professional development throughout their careers' (Nutbrown, 2012:2).

Elfer (2014), who highlights the lack of support available in many Early Years settings, reiterates this. With the introduction of the reformed EYFS,

professional support, particularly in child development, is essential to ensure that EYPs are confident enough to understand play, development and learning. In the current climate of reform there is a need for research to discover effective ways to support and sustain professional practice.

3.2: Philosophical assumptions underpinning this research

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that choosing a paradigm is the starting point in theoretical and methodological approaches. In this study, I adopt a constructivist/interpretive perspective aspiring towards understanding and interpreting EYPs' perceptions about their practice and understanding of children's learning. I have long been drawn to social constructivism, influenced by the ideas of Vygotsky (1978), specifically social and collaborative processes in bringing about meaning and knowledge through social construction. As such, my beliefs guide the research.

Social constructivists offer a useful perspective to position this research. Vygotsky considers social interaction and culture to have a significant impact on cognitive development. Cognition is not considered as an individual process, but as a collective process.

According to Klein and Myers (1999:69), interpretivists share much in common with social constructivists. Their position 'assumes that our knowledge of reality is gained only through social construction such as language, consciousness shared meanings, documents and other artefacts'. This point is further illustrated by Creswell (2007), who asserts that they share a focus on how human beings interact within their social worlds.

Therefore, the nursery setting, and the EYPs who form the basis of this research, are viewed as existing within society and that this society is positioned in time and hugely influenced by history and culture. This implies that knowledge and meaning are constructed within a social system, through interactions with the system and the people in it. Lincoln and Guba (1985:77) make clear that 'events or situations are theoretically open to as many constructions as there are persons engaged in them, or as many reconstructions by a single individual as imagination allows'.

Fosnot (1992:169) concludes 'the process of construction is more like the process of inventing, or at least reinventing, in that it is akin to the creative process', involving individual engagement with the cultural environment and the people within it. Davis and Sumara (2003:125) highlight the learning process as complex, asserting that it has many facets which support the ongoing process of change that takes place 'within an evolving landscape of activity'. Therefore, researchers who take this view also position themselves in the research to acknowledge how their own understanding can influence how they see the world.

Consequently, the constructivist view of social reality denotes that social life is based less on factual reality and more on the ideas, beliefs and perceptions which humans hold subjectively about reality. In other words, they believe that people socially interact and respond to their lived experiences based on what they believe to be real, rather than what is objectively real. This is further articulated by Stringer (1996:41) who says 'the aim of (constructivist) inquiry is not to establish 'truth' or to describe what is

really happening, but to reveal the different truths and realities – constructions – held by different individual groups’.

This study seeks to understand and analyse Early Years Practitioners’ perceptions of their OAP practice and understanding about children’s learning. The social constructivist perspective allows for an in-depth understanding which considers analysis of the truths and realities of all those involved (the Early Years Practitioner and the researcher). It is consistent with the research question and will meet the goal of this research. It is important to note that the social constructivist paradigm allows for a relationship to emerge and develop between the researcher and the participants that will aid the collection of rich data.

3.3: Ontological and epistemological assumptions

Social constructivist researchers do not believe the idea that there is one objective reality. Instead, they embrace the idea of multiple interpretations. The current study is concerned with the perspectives on EYPs’ understanding about their practice and children's learning. It is assumed that they will construct different accounts in relation to their own understanding about children’s learning.

According to Crotty (1989), epistemology in research can be seen to be the philosophical foundation that underpins it. Consequently, in this study I adopt a social constructivist paradigm as its theoretical framework, based on the following assumptions as outlined by Crotty (1989):

1. Early Years Practitioners have a knowledge of OAP but their knowledge and beliefs may vary considerably depending on their experiences.
2. Early Years Practitioners are instruments of their own practice, how they respond and interact with children, and in their making of professional judgements.
3. Early Years Practitioners' work is rooted in social and cultural contexts such as qualifications, length of time in the job and relationships with children, colleagues and parents. These all add to Early Years Practitioners' understanding of their work with children.
4. As the researcher, I will make sense of what I observe based on my own knowledge, experiences and understanding of the context.

3.4: Choosing a methodology approach

Creswell (2007:14) says that qualitative research 'is a form of social and human science research that does not have firm guidelines or specific procedures and is evolving and changing constantly'. Qualitative research derives from social and cultural anthropology. This design is particularly conducive to the current study, as the focus is to understand the perceptions and beliefs which EYPs have about themselves and their work.

This contrasts with the quantitative research method, where the aim is to test a hypothesis to establish facts, and specify and set apart the relationships between the variables. The goal of quantitative research is to systematically and scientifically carry out an examination of the data and its relationships. Measuring is central to quantitative research because it shows

the relationships between the data and variables. For example, variables relate to independent characteristics which may be manipulated by the researcher; dependent variables are characteristics which are influenced by the manipulation of the independent variable; and extraneous variables are usually demographic information.

When analysing with the quantitative approach, there is little room for interference on the part of the researcher. I sought to discover what meaning the participants attached to their experiences, how they interpreted their work, and what their perspectives were on the Group Intervention. I believed that quantitative methods were not likely to yield the rich and complex data necessary to attend to the research questions. With this in mind, I adopted a qualitative approach.

3.5: Phenomenology and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) describe IPA as a method of analysis which draws its theoretical underpinnings from the philosophy of knowledge, phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. It requires the researcher to analyse each case study on an individual basis, before identifying any possible common themes. Furthermore, the authors also note that within IPA the researcher's role is to understand how participants make sense of their world by capturing their experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

Smith and Osborn (2003) highlight the dimensions of research and analysis throughout the work of anyone conducting a study of this kind, a process which they refer to as 'the double hermeneutic'. They state that 'as

participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world' (Smith & Osborn, 2003:51).

Phenomenology - Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is grounded in phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Phenomenology is best described as a philosophy rather than a methodology and Husserl (1927) is generally referred to as the 'father of phenomenology' (Smith et al., 2009:12). Husserl's (1927) theory emphasises the significance of paying close attention to the individual's experience and individual awareness of this experience. Heidegger (1962); Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Sartre (1969) advance Husserl's (1927) work. They put forward the notion that individuals exist in a lived world rather than in isolation from it, thus indicating that an individual's engagement with the lived world affects their viewpoint on their lives and experiences.

This is a fundamental aspect of IPA – within this method, researchers must acknowledge the complexities involved in the meaning-making processes of their participants. Hermeneutics is the theory of interpretation and the next philosophical underpinning of IPA. Throughout hermeneutics, interpretation is considered a form of art, whereby the interpretative researcher is adept at offering an awareness of an experience that the writer cannot. Throughout this theory, the complexity of the interactions between the interpreter and the interpreted is recognised.

Hermeneutics – Hermeneutics theory draws attention to the complexities embedded in gaining access to another person's experience. It suggests that access is dependent upon, and further compounded by, the researcher's own interpretations, emphasising the importance of an understanding of one's own assumptions and preconceived ideas (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Smith and Osborn (2003) propose that access to the respondent's lived experience is dependent on, and further complicated by, the researcher's own subjectivity and understanding about a particular issue. In other words, it is accepted that the researcher interprets the findings – she or he is the research tool and therefore needs to highlight his or her own assumptions. This applies to all qualitative research, not just to IPA.

In this way, the analytical process is considered to be phenomenological and interpretative, and a result of interactions between the participants and the researcher.

Hermeneutics theory acknowledges that the construction of an interpretative account is repetitive and based on the concept of the hermeneutics circle. During the analysis, I went back and forth iteratively through a variety of different ways of considering the data – to understand any part I had to examine the whole, and to understand the whole, I needed to examine the parts.

The concluding influence upon IPA is idiography. An idiographic approach concentrates on the experience of individuals, as opposed to an experience that is universal. It seeks to make exact statements about individuals (Smith

et al., 2009). This contrasts with more conventional nomothetic approaches, which focus on making general statements about abstract principles.

Idiography – Idiographic research examines a phenomenon, in a particular context, with the expectation that what is learnt can be transferred to other comparable cases. The idiographic approach requires numerous data points per participant, which are then analysed to determine the relationship between variables for each participant. Thus, the responses of participants are analysed individually rather than as a group.

In this way, the importance of the quality of the data is emphasised, placing the researcher at the heart of the investigation. The assumption, therefore, is that the researcher is best-placed to gain a deeper understanding of an individual experience, rather than generate large amounts of general information. In keeping with this notion, Smith and Osborn (2008) recommend small sample sizes and homogeneous group samples. Though idiographic research does not make statistical generalisations, it can apply the findings of individual cases to those where the work being done is similar in nature and context. Thus, it comments on, and seeks consensus on, the experience of human beings in well-defined circumstances, rather than attempting to develop theories that apply to the human condition, as is the case with the nomothetic approach.

The idiographic approach is based on the principle that participants are experts on their individual experiences. Harré (1979), cited in Smith & Eatough (2006:326), describes idiographic research as being ‘the intensive examination of the individual in his or her own right, as an intrinsic part of

psychology's remit'. His description reinforces the view that an idiographic approach is both thorough and systematic. Moreover, he suggests that it reflects a commitment to analysing singular case studies, by providing detailed insights into a group of individuals, and further exploring the unique characteristics of each individual (Harré, 1979, in Smith & Eatough, 2006).

3.6: Reasons for choosing IPA

The principle reason for choosing IPA was that I wanted to attempt to locate the universal nature of the Observation, Assessment and Planning process by learning directly from those engaging with it. IPA analysis is grounded in phenomenology and the process is inductive rather than theory-driven. It is concerned with keeping the voices of the participants and, at the same time, enables the researcher to interpret the participants' comments.

There are three main reasons why I adopted an IPA approach. Firstly, I wanted to identify what was experienced and how the EYPs experienced it. Additional preoccupations also existed because there is so little empirical research about EYPs' perceptions of themselves in their work. Literature has largely focused on the perceptions of teachers.

Secondly, I wanted to gain in-depth information and a new perspective. I was therefore keen to conduct case studies that might give practitioners a voice, through deep theoretical analysis which seeks to challenge some aspects which are often taken for granted about their role.

Finally, I wanted to report on the generic themes, and each participant's individual account about the phenomenon, from the perspective of both the

researcher and the participants, to gain a deeper understanding of the issues being investigated. Yin (1994) defines case study research as an empirical inquiry which investigates contemporary phenomena within its real-life context.

In determining the research methodology, Grounded Theory was rejected despite its similarity to IPA. Grounded Theory is a methodology and a method, as is IPA. Cohen et al. (2008:170) define Grounded Theory as 'developing theories to explain phenomena, the theories emerging from the data rather than being prefigured or predetermined'. It focuses on particular types of research questions, namely those based on social processes, or factors that affect particular phenomena. IPA takes a more psychological approach, paying attention to the researcher gaining a thorough understanding of the individual experience.

Yin (1994:9) argues that case study research is most useful when a 'how' or 'why' question is being asked about a contemporary set of events 'over which the investigator has little or no control'. IPA ultimately seemed to provide a coherent framework to understand the research question of this study: *How might a group approach to supervision impact on EYPs perceptions of their practice and understanding about children's learning?* However, Grounded Theory requires theoretical sampling, with the goal of constructing a theory grounded in the data.

I also felt that Thematic Analysis was unsuitable for two reasons. Firstly, it does not capture individual people or perspectives. It is best used with large groups, as it focuses on meanings across data, whereas IPA relies on idiographic focuses and can be applied to a single study. Thematic Analysis

is a generic term used for a variety of approaches to qualitative data analysis – it seeks to question the understanding of how individuals use language to create and enact identities, activities and relationships, whereas IPA gives the researcher the opportunity to examine the ‘lived experience’ of change and the influences it has on individuals (Smith et al., 2009).

Secondly, Thematic Analysis allows researchers to modify the content of their interviews, based on the ideas that previous participants have talked about – applying progressive, purposeful sampling to the qualitative data does this. Thematic Analysis does not attempt to develop a theory, despite being able to produce informed interpretations of data (Smith et al., 2009).

Neither Thematic Analysis or Grounded Theory have a theoretical approach. On the other hand, IPA enquires into an understanding of ‘the lived experience’ from the perspective of the individual (Smith et al., 2009). In this way, IPA provides more insight into subjective experiences in a way that the other two approaches do not. The advantage of using IPA is that it places emphasis on the possible transferability of findings from case to case. Smith et al. (2009:4) argue for ‘theoretical generalisability’, where the reader of the report can assess the evidence in relation to their existing professional and experiential knowledge. This suggests that IPA studies can focus on particular phenomena and ultimately highlight the findings as universal. Thematic Analysis does not capture people’s experiences or perspectives. It is best used with large groups, as it mainly focuses on meanings across the data.

Both approaches have many similarities in their underpinning of philosophy and goals. Each method addresses the fundamental questions of

interpretation, meaning and understanding when exploring the data through interviews, questionnaires and surveys. In addition, each of them covers the importance of interpretations and patterns in the data. IPA was finally decided upon because it focuses on ways in which individuals identify change; additionally, it essentially works with a homogeneous sample to find similarities and differences, whereas Grounded Theory suggests that the data speaks for itself.

IPA has a dual aspect, focusing on the participant and the researcher making meaning. In contrast, Thematic Analysis focuses mainly on meanings of participants and may not capture the divergence in data. The present study fits well with IPA's criteria because it seeks to better understand the individuals' perception of how they have changed following the Group Intervention.

3.7: The process of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

This section will describe the process of IPA analysis in detail. Smith et al. (2009) outline some specific criteria for following IPA; they state that this approach requires the researcher to have a clear focus and strong, robust data, which has been obtained from adhering to four stages of analysis.

Stage 1 – The initial stage involves reading and re-reading the interview transcript. They suggest that this process may involve 'recording some of your most powerful recollections of the interview experience itself, or some of

your own initial, and most striking observations about the transcript in a notebook, in order to bracket them off for a while' (Smith et al., 2009:82).

They also note that, during this initial stage, the researcher should develop a set of descriptive comments on each interview transcript. These will help to identify key descriptions, explanations, and the emotional responses (Smith et al., 2009).

Stage 2 - The second stage is described as 'the most detailed and time consuming', entailing five layers of analysis (Smith et al., 2009:83). These are:

1. The researcher examines the transcript and records descriptive comments, which capture the essence of the participants' thoughts and experiences. The key words and phrases used by the participants are then recorded to cover conceptual understanding.
2. Concentration on the participants' linguistic comments, with an emphasis on 'how the transcript reflects the ways in which the content and meaning are presented' (Smith et al., 2009:88). They assert that this process of searching for meaning behind words enables the researcher to explore how and what the textual data contributes to the participants' understanding. They further suggest that attention must be paid to the language used, and to any incidences of repetition, pauses and metaphors (Smith et al., 2009).

3. This is described as interpretative, since it involves the researcher's interpretations and understanding of the data (Smith et al., 2009). According to the authors, the 'conceptual coding may take an interrogative form' in which the researcher begins to question meanings and gain insights into the data (Smith et al., 2009:88). They argue that the questioning process is not about finding answers. Its purpose is to open one's understanding about a plethora of conditional meanings. Notably, Smith et al. (2009:89) further suggest that personal reflection is often an element of the conceptual coding process, stating that 'the interpretations which you develop at this stage will inevitably draw on your own experiential and/or professional knowledge'. They also highlight the usefulness of drawing on one's own perceptions and understandings, to test the meanings of participants' key experiences.
4. During this stage, the authors present 'deconstruction' as a strategy to convey the thorough focus of the participants' words and the meaning attached to them. Furthermore, they recommend reading the transcript backwards, taking one sentence at a time, to look even more closely at what the participants are really saying.
5. This stage is an overview of writing initial notes. Here the researcher works on the transcript one section at a time, looking closely at the descriptive comments. After this, the researcher must 'then go back and examine it with a linguistic focus' (Smith et al., 2009:90). Indeed, Smith et al. (2009) assert that this analytical

process will help further engagement with the text as a wide range of meanings are explored and the depth of analysis is directed to a more interpretative level.

The initial and provisional notes developed in the first stage form part of the second stage of IPA analysis. According to the authors, this stage involves 'an analytic shift towards working primarily with initial notes rather than the transcript itself' (Smith et al., 2009:91) and the researcher must now establish the emergent themes. This is where each part of the analysis is understood in relation to the whole and the whole is interpreted in relation to the parts.

By this point, the researcher should be very familiar with the content of the interview and understand that the transcript maintains its centrality in relation to the data (Smith et al., 2009). However, this level of analysis does involve disconnecting the flow of the transcript and this can feel uncomfortable at first for the researcher. The researcher may also feel uncomfortable with the complexity of the data as he or she interprets and organises it into fragmented parts to analyse and make sense of the participants' experiences and the meanings that they have attached to them (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) highlight this part of the process as particularly important since it helps the researcher to focus on distinct parts of the transcript.

Stage 3 - The process at the third stage is an example of the hermeneutic circle – this is because the transcript is separated during the analysis, but replaced at the end, when it is time to write up the research document and highlight the emergent themes that have been identified. The purpose of

creating emergent themes is an effort to construct a succinct and 'pithy statement' of what is imperative in the variety of comments captured in the transcript (Smith et al., 2009:92). These should capture and reflect the understanding of the participants, whilst maintaining a focus on key textual data. It is in this way that Smith et al. (2009) illustrate how the emergent themes represent the participants' words and thoughts but also the researcher's interpretations.

During the third stage of analysis, the researcher must examine ways in which the different themes fit together and be guided by the main research question and its range (Smith et al., 2009). Paying attention to the ways in which an emergent theme in one case can highlight a difference in another case must be explored. The researcher should also seek to establish the themes which are most powerful, as well as those which have the greatest number of commonalities and seem most exceptional (Smith et al., 2009). Finally, Smith et al. (2009) assert that this is the way to secure generic themes which stand out clearly. The significance and importance of each theme must therefore be scrutinised, going back to review the original transcript if necessary. The overall aim is to develop a structure which supports the researcher's efforts to draw out the most significant extracts of the participant's account (Smith et al., 2009).

Once the first transcript has been analysed, the researcher must move on to the next transcript and repeat the process. As previously mentioned, IPA requires analysis to be carried out on a case-by-case basis and this must be done before any possible commonalities between themes can be identified (Smith et al., 2009). Reviewing each transcript and following the first three

stages of analysis is a repetitive process and, because of this, it is likely that the researcher will be influenced by what is found in the first case study. Considering this, the authors warn researchers to bracket off any ideas that may arise from the first case while working on the second case (Smith et al., 2009).

Stage 4 - The fourth and final stage describes looking for patterns across cases. During this level of analysis, the researcher looks for connections throughout all the cases in the sample (Smith et al., 2009).

3.8: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in research

Originally, professionals within the fields of Health and Clinical Psychology used IPA as an analytical frame to study qualitative data reflecting the subjective lived experiences of the participants (Flowers et al., 1997; Osborn & Smith, 1998; Smith, 1996). More recently, it has also been adopted by those working in Developmental Disability, Psychology, Pedagogy, Culture and Society, Educational Child Psychology, Early Education and Development, and Counselling Psychology Research (Mayes & Crossan, 2007; Huws et al., 2008; Walters & Harris, 2009; Doppler-Bourassa & Harkins, 2008; Doutre et al., 2013; Morris, 2013; Harrison et al., 2012; Mhairi, 2014). This substantive body of researchers highlights how IPA has increased understanding, as it allows researchers to explore participants' perceptions of their own experiences. Smith et al. (2009:1) describe it as 'a

qualitative research approach committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences’.

Smith’s (1999) first research project, using IPA, also carried out a qualitative longitudinal idiographic study in which he investigated how three pregnant women’s sense of self and identity might be transformed during their first pregnancies. He considered longitudinal case studies to be useful in that they allowed for the processes of ‘preparatory significance’ to be thoroughly scrutinised. Because of this, he chose to assess the significance of psychological processes during pregnancy, a time that most people view as a positive transformation.

He conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the women four times – early on, in the mid-stages of gestation, and five months after the birth of their first child. Between the interviews he had weekly contact with the women, all of whom kept a diary of their personal experiences – these were also shared with Smith. Entries were completed ‘conscientiously’ and Smith (1999) collected these personal accounts at regular intervals to allow for similarities and differences to emerge. He also used them as a narrative account for analysis, having at least 20 data points for each participant (Smith, 1999). Moreover, he combined the interview data with the women’s diary entries to use as the main source of information in his case studies.

This study found that the women’s shared themes resulted from their encounters within major social gatherings (Smith, 1999), which inspired reflection on their family roles and their sense of identity in other ways. One of his subjects felt an enhanced sense of family connection, while another said that her pregnancy seemed like a barrier which had created a sense of

distance between her and her partner. A third woman saw her pregnancy as a rite of passage to motherhood and felt this was being publicly acknowledged.

Smith (1999) concludes that each individual experience was grounded in personal situations and perceptions. It is on this basis that the argument for highlighting individual perspectives as well as shared experiences rests, being the principle that underlies IPA.

To enhance the relevance of IPA in teaching and learning, the work of Doppler-Bourassa, Harkins and Mehta (2008) provides one of the first examples of applying IPA for Early Childhood intervention studies. The authors examined ways in which four pre-school teachers talked about children's conflict. Each participant was interviewed before and after a series of six parent-teacher workshops, and nine hours of weekly classroom support, over an 11-week intervention period (Doppler-Bourassa et al., 2008).

Before this study, whenever conflicts arose teachers would step in, with the main strategy being to take control of the situation. Post-intervention, however, the teachers seemed more empowered to support children to develop their own strategies and choices for resolving conflict. Subsequently, it was found that their participation in the study had led to significant changes in the way they discussed children's conflicts (Doppler-Bourassa et al., 2008).

In summary, the findings of the study conducted by Doppler-Bourassa et al. (2008) suggest that teachers' initial strategies stem from professional decisions based on their own socially-constructed perceptions of childhood

conflicts. The fact that they ultimately become less directive, and more inclined to offer alternatives post-intervention, points to an expansion in each practitioner's personal and professional vision (Doppler-Bourassa et al., 2008). This outcome clearly indicates that interpretations are indeed linked to the personal values and practical knowledge which teachers bring to their professional experiences (Doppler-Bourassa et al., 2008).

Within IPA, there is an emphasis on the possible transferability of findings from one specific setting to other similar contexts. Smith et al. (2009:4) argue for 'theoretical generalisability', where the reader of the report can assess the evidence in relation to their existing professional and experiential knowledge. This suggests that IPA studies, which focus on particular phenomena, might also highlight elements which are universal to a particular context. This means that the findings could be generally and more widely applied to the field of Early Childhood studies.

Other researchers who have used IPA with children and young people are Huws, Roberts and Jones (2008) and, more recently, Doutre, Green and Knight-Elliott (2013). The former used IPA retrospectively, to understand how nine young people were affected by being diagnosed with high-functioning autism. Using three open-ended questions during the interviews, they encourage the participants to discuss their perceptions of autism (Huws et al., 2008). Notably, Huws et al. (2008) find that several common themes emerge. They conclude that diagnosis, disclosure, and having autism, are embedded in the perceptions of all the young people. Consequently, they developed five superordinate themes, reflecting the original words and

meanings of the participants, and their interpretations as researchers (Huws et al., 2008:99).

3.9: Limitations of IPA

IPA contains particular limitations. Although it acknowledges the researcher's viewpoint, it does not include directions on how to combine this deep level of reflexivity into the research process. Therefore, a central concern is that of the researcher's preconceived notion and how this can affect analysis. Primary limitations of IPA are the issues of subjectivity and the potential bias relating to the researchers' participation in the analysis process.

Brocki and Wearden (2006) highlight a related limitation. They argue that IPA does not define the best ways to understand the data within conducted interviews. They also say it is not sufficiently informative regarding the level of engagement that researchers should have with their participants. These elements lead to some disparity in the quality and depth of the information provided. Brocki and Wearden (2006) also highlight another weakness, in that IPA is widely used within clinical settings, such as health, social care, and counselling psychology, to identify change and develop a deeper understanding of a phenomenon. It is also used to cover a diverse range of health conditions, such as long-term physical or mental illness. They suggest that the different ways in which it is applied within the various disciplines makes its literature difficult to evaluate (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

Another limitation is that IPA analysis demands a great deal of time, being both iterative and complex. Clark (2009:39) claims that the existing literature

on IPA draws much attention to how long it takes a researcher to analyse data in sufficient depth – this aspect ‘requires a significant amount of time and commitment from researchers’. According to Smith et al. (2006), it is still being developed and evaluated as a research tool.

Besides concerns pertaining to researcher bias and time constraints, a further major limitation of IPA is its heavy reliance on participants describing their accounts, without considering their ability to articulate their experiences. This dependence on participants’ use of language to communicate their experience, and the researcher’s on providing rich descriptions of the lived experience, leaves the approach wanting to a degree.

Acknowledging these limitations, I took steps to minimise their impact. I recognised that my view on what constitutes good Early Years education may have influenced overall analysis of the data and stated my assumptions up front. As such, personal beliefs can never be bracketed out completely. The coding for the emergent themes was scrutinised through peer review and through rigorous discussions with my supervisors. To diminish the limitation of potential bias during data analysis, I continued to reflect throughout on how, and in what ways, I might be affecting the participants.

3.10: Reflexivity

Finlay (2003:108) describes reflexivity as the ‘process of continually reflecting upon our interpretations of both our experience and the phenomena being studied so as to move beyond the partiality of our previous understandings and our investment in particular research outcomes’.

Reflexivity not only applies to IPA studies – it is also relevant to other types of qualitative research. Another point to note is that reflexivity is a vital component in data generation and interpretative analysis. This is important because, even though both the researcher and the participants are recognising the lived experience, sense must be made of the phenomena to learn more about the issues involved (Smith et al., 2009).

Thus, the researcher's interpretations will invariably be influenced by personal values and beliefs. It is crucial to reflect on the relevant interpretations so that these can be temporarily be put aside, thereby allowing the scope to develop an awareness of one's personal position (Smith et al., 2009). According to Finlay (2008), IPA researchers adopt two contradictory stances: they need to 'bracket off' their pre-understanding of the research scenario, yet, at the same time, use this as a source of insight.

'Bracketing off' requires the researcher to be detached, whilst remaining open and involved. Smith et al. (2009) suggest that access to internal emotions and biases are dependent upon the researcher's levels of self-awareness. They also suggest that suspending personal judgement affects the researcher at an intellectual and personal level (Smith et al., 2009).

The researcher may improve his or her ability to bracket off in four ways: building in time for reflection in the context of the investigation; using initial notes and memos written throughout the process as a way of continuously examining and reflecting on engagement with the data (Smith et al., 2009); keeping and maintaining a reflective journal in which emotions and biases are identified; and discussion of the data analysis with supervisors to become

aware of how the researcher is bracketing off and using it as insight or not (Smith et al., 2009).

In addition, it will also help the researcher to explore his or her biases. Smith et al. (2009) imply that the process of bracketing throughout the research process will help the researcher to minimise bias, moving away from only relying on his or her own personal interpretation, to a much deeper level of analysis. Despite acknowledging that the process of self-discovery can be both painful and isolating, Finlay (2008) claims that it is this experience which often leads to that personal transformation.

3.11: Method

The following sections detail how the research was undertaken, explain how participants were selected, and what procedures were used. They also detail how data was gathered from semi-structured interviews and how I worked with each transcript, from initial comments through to developing themes, and the development of the superordinate themes. They also describe how I used interpretative phenomenology for the analysis of the data. The findings are discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

3.12: Participants

I contacted 15 nurseries in an area where I had never previously worked. Each nursery manager was invited to complete an Observation, Assessment and Planning Audit (OAPA) which drew from a range of materials, including

an Ofsted evaluation schedule, to determine if their team would fit the criteria of developing their Observation, Assessment and Planning (OAP) practice. This audit was intended to be a helpful tool for managers to assess their team's work in a broad and meaningful way and to give me insight into whether an intervention was necessary (Appendix A).

The criteria for successful selection of participants were as follows:

1. Children are observed regularly in accordance with the assessment and planning system. Individual records are kept on their progress in different aspects of their development and learning.
2. Day-to-day plans are drawn up with the specific aim of developing experiences that will meet the needs and interests of each child individually, or as part of a group.
3. Practitioners meet at least once a fortnight to review children's observations and plan their next steps.
4. A twice-weekly informal reflection of how the provision meets the children's needs and interests. The provision is adapted in response to the children's interests.

Purposeful sampling allowed for identification and selection across seven nurseries based in Midtown. Although all seven nurseries identified their OAP practice as 'developing', purposeful selection was based on variations across certain distinguishing criteria of the OAPA questionnaire and demographic data (Appendix B and C). Four nurseries were found to be suitable and I offered them the opportunity to take part in the study.

Fiddle Sticks, the nursery featured, was the first to make contact and agree to participate. The nursery manager, Christina, volunteered her team. Consent was then obtained from the participants and the parents of the children who would be discussed (Appendix D for participants' consent forms and Appendix E for parent consent forms).

3.13: Number of participants

This phenomenological study is concerned with trying to understand what a group work intervention is like from the point of view of four participants. Although seven participants who worked together at Fiddle Sticks took part in the Group Intervention, this study is about four of them. The criteria for reducing the number of participants were as follows:

1. All participants had presented at a group work intervention.
2. All participants had attended six or more group sessions.

I decided upon these selection criteria to ensure adequate shared experience among the various participants. Purposeful selection was also based on variations across certain distinctive factors. To protect the participants' anonymity, and for the purposes of confidentiality, pseudonyms for the participants and for the location of this study are used throughout (see Appendix F for pen picture of each participant).

Table 1: Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Ethnicity
Denise	Female	49	White British
Kate	Female	45	White British
Julie	Female	27	White British
Erica	Female	24	White British

3.14: Context of the study

The Group Intervention took the form of one-hour discussions over ten months, on the last Thursday of each month. These replaced the staff's regular planning meetings. Each session started at 6pm and focused on the individual views of participants about their key children. Practitioners presented and shared their observations and interpretations to the group.

To aid the smooth running of these meetings, I developed a structure where the group could talk about their observations and explain how they came to particular conclusions.

3.15: Data collection

Smith and Osborn (2008) advocate the use of semi-structured interviews for an IPA study. They suggest that semi-structured interviews can best smooth the progress of a flexible conversation between the researcher and the participants. This gave me an opportunity to probe and ask supplementary

questions. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary method of data collection – I believe this method to be of most use since it has the scope to draw out rich and fascinating data (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) state that a key advantage of collecting data through in-depth interviews is that it provides the researcher with a picture of the efforts of interviewees in making sense of their experiences. Smith et al. (2009:66) describe the interview as a complex process in which understandings gained 'are not to be held to be "the truth" – but they are seen to be meaningful'.

Although semi-structured interviews have strengths, there are various constraints associated with them. Not all interviewees are uniformly obliging and able to articulate their perceptions. The interviewer also requires interview skills, particularly in the style of interaction. Interviews are also not impartial tools for gathering data – they should be considered as an interaction, and as biased in their scope (Smith et al., 2009:66).

With guidance from my supervisors, I developed a range of open-ended and exploratory questions which focused upon the respondents communicating their experiences. Between June and August 2013, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted, each lasting between 25 and 55 minutes. These were also audio taped after obtaining consent.

Interviews were conducted in two phases over 11 months. In the first phase, group interviews were conducted after six months to elicit detailed information about the participants' perceptions. The second phase interviews were conducted by myself at the end of the Intervention, using semi-structured interview questions. During each interview, the participants were asked to describe their experiences of presenting observations, commenting

on how they felt about the process, the impact on their practice, and the effect on their sense of self. Audio recordings of the interviews were sent to an external third party and transcribed verbatim (Appendix G for semi-structured interview questions).

Table 2: A sample of interview questions

Section A – Personal details

Could you tell me about your experience in Early Years?

Prompt – How long have you been working with children? What made you want to start?

Section B – Experience and professional self

Could you describe your experience of presenting at the group discussion?

Prompt – What do you remember? What were your expectations of the group discussions? What issues did you discuss?

Section C – Specific questions about the process and which aspects may have had an influence on the individual

What did you think about the process of reading through the observation and discussing it? What else is needed? How do you think that it benefited you or not?

What would you do differently?

3.16: The group supervision process

Each participant observed one child, focusing on the way in which he or she approached learning and following through with self-initiated tasks. Observational evidence was gathered by watching each focus child play for between ten and 20 minutes, over two consecutive days, looking out for complexities and connections within that play. After observations had been carried out, every episode of play was written up immediately.

All observations were videotaped, via a closed circuit, so that all research participants could have visual insight into the observation being discussed. Each written observation was then discussed, analysed and shared with colleagues. Differing viewpoints and interpretations about what was observed were then acknowledged and analysed, to develop a clearer understanding about children's play. The hour-long discussions were held once a month, for 11 months.

The first session was an introductory one, where the structure of the group session was explained. I facilitated the remaining ten sessions. All the participants presented at least once to the group, two of them presented twice. During the course of ten months, the discussion aspect became the EYPs' main mechanism to explore new ideas. In this way, the structure for organising the group meetings played a vital role in supporting them to develop their thinking throughout the whole process.

3.17: Data analysis

This section describes the four stages of analysis I conducted using IPA, following processes outlined by Smith et al. (2009). During the initial stage of

analysis, I studied the first transcripts from the semi-structured interviews before proceeding on to a group level of analysis which brought together the data of all four participants.

The initial stage of analysis for each transcript involved reading it several times and noting down my thoughts and feelings. Initial exploratory notes were written in the left-hand margin of each relevant page – these helped to form a summary of the connections and the initial interpretations made, despite not being definitive.

I then completed line-by-line analysis of the transcript to code the participant's experience based on answering the following question: *What does this data say about how attending the group discussions may have influenced their perception of their practice and understanding of children's learning?*

I then coded the data, which enabled me to find patterns in the text and place those pieces of text together into relevant groups. Thus, with each transcript, I coded texts and arranged them into emerging themes. My data was then analysed in three ways:

Descriptive comments – these have a phenomenological emphasis and remain close to the participants' description of meanings.

Linguistic comments – these focus on the way the participant describes the experience (for example, their use of the word I versus us).

Conceptual comments – these include my interpretations of how the participants understand the experience that they describe. This results in a deeper level of engagement with the data and a growing awareness with the participant's experiential world.

During the second stage of analysis, I put together a chart of code names and grouped these together under themes for each participant. According to Smith et al. (2009:92), emergent themes should capture the 'psychological essence' of the participants' experience. Smith et al. (2009) suggest it is in this way that the analysis represents an elevated level of abstraction while being rooted in the data.

This stage required me to look for patterns, and group themes together, according to their conceptual likeness. Smith et al. (2009) describe this stage of analysis as the most important as it involves searching for connections across emergent themes. I began the process of putting similar codes together whilst also letting the single codes emerge.

Next, I analysed the first transcript again to validate the positioning of codes amongst the known themes. A lot of the codes transferred without problems into the chart. I then examined the quotes related to each theme in the coding chart and noted my interpretations. After finishing the first transcript, this whole process was done again for transcript two, thus allowing unique themes to emerge.

I then read the remaining two transcripts and immersed myself in the data by doing line-by-line analysis to code for emerging themes in the participants' lived experience. Again, I carried out a second level of analysis for each participant and deductively positioned their quotes among the known themes in their chart of emerging themes. Smith et al. (2009:88) note that during the process of this 'conceptual annotating', a shift occurs in the researcher's focus 'towards the participant's over-arching understanding of the matters that they are discussing'.

The final stage of analysis involved cutting and pasting quotes from each transcript and putting like with like, clustering quotes from the transcripts in a new document. I then set about establishing connecting factors and searching for patterns between the themes. This resulted in a group of themes which had been clustered together because of their similarity.

During this process, I identified the higher order themes that were common between cases. Once all four transcripts had been analysed, I developed a table of themes for the entire study (see Table 6). I also tried to make sense of the connections between the sub-themes.

The themes were then brought together into two main clusters. These cluster themes were named, thus creating superordinate themes. However, I continually returned to each transcript to confirm the superordinate still reflected what the participant had said. A table of superordinate themes, accompanied related sub-themes, and verbatim quotes were created.

I found two superordinate themes in the IPA analysis. As summarised in the following table, they are A Perceived Sense of Inadequacy and Re-evaluating Assumptions. The superordinate theme titles provided a coherent framework to understand the phenomena of group work intervention on a small group of EYPs and the impact it had on their professional practice, knowledge and thinking. (Appendix N, O, P and Q for narrative account for each participant).

Table 3: Number of quotes per theme and participant

Theme	A Perceived Sense of Inadequacy			Re-evaluating Assumptions		
Sub-themes	Lack of knowledge, skills and confidence	Fear of failure	Technical approach	Examining implicit beliefs	Changing emotional engagement	Becoming a team
Denise	9	7	5	13	4	28
Kate	7	2	9	7	5	6
Julie	6	3	4	7	12	5
Erica	7	4	4	8	9	7

3.18: Writing up

The final stage of IPA analysis was writing up. I organised all the passages by theme and then separately by respondent. Data and findings were then written up for each participant with a mix of extracts from the transcript and my interpretative comments (see Chapter 4 for synthesis of findings). Following analysis, the data from interviews with myself and the external moderator were used to link the findings to those of Vygotsky's relating to social and collaborative processes.

3.19: Self-reflexivity

My reflexive practice was in part influenced by my reflections. I wanted to develop my own understanding, so it was critical that I was aware of the assumptions and main concerns which shaped my interpretations and interactions with my data. This change in my understanding allowed me to gain a better insight into my priorities and consider different interpretations, rather than reacting to them. As the facilitator to the group, this meant that I could incorporate insights from group members during the discussions.

I was very aware that there was at least the potential for some conflict of interest as I was wearing two hats. The first related to some of the participants knowing me as a consultant in the local authority before they knew me as a group facilitator. Throughout the intervention I remained mindful of the extent to which the four EYPs may have said what they did to please me, and to what extent I could trust that their comments were authentic expressions of their thinking and feelings. By focusing the discussions on their comments, I could be direct with the EYPs. In doing so, I

empowered them and created the possibility that our relationship could evolve instead of being masked by pleasing comments. With my second hat, my conflict of interest related to being so closely involved in the Intervention that it almost felt as if it was a professional investment by me – I needed to be successful in my group facilitation role. I also needed to be successful in my research model – I had regular supervision and my supervisors provided me with another tier of reflection that was a significant aspect of the research.

Though it is true that personal and professional beliefs can never be completely bracketed out, there are ways to mitigate the impact of this potential bias. This is where the importance of being reflective becomes crucial. This being the case, I used deliberate and controlled phenomenological bracketing techniques to explore my personal responses to the participants' interview transcripts. Throughout the entire process I kept a reflective journal on my understanding about how my assumptions impacted on and informed my approach. My journal helped me to make my underlying assumptions visible. After reading the transcript I answered the following questions in my reflective journal – *What are my beliefs about EYPs? How has my previous experience formed these beliefs? What are my beliefs about EYPs' training and support needs? Why do I think that?* In this way, I adopted a more critical and reflective approach.

Smith et al. (2009) emphasise that this phase of the analytical process requires extra time. The intense reflection and refinement of ideas is necessary and any researcher is urged to remain focused on the fact that this exploration is 'primarily about the participant, not oneself'. At this point, I

sensed the real significance of the process of reflection, acknowledging that it helped me to feel much closer to my participants. I realised that one cannot be completely separated from one's own research study. Rather, one can only hope to see it with a new and more heightened awareness.

IPA acknowledges the importance of reflexivity, suggesting that the researcher is both inside and outside a piece of research (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, even though researchers adopting the IPA method of analysis recognise the factor of subjective bias on their interpretations, this approach considers these very assumptions and pre-understandings to be a necessary precondition for making sense of a participant's words, thoughts and key experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Given this seeming paradox, the main task of researchers is to offer their own interpretation of a participant's account, while also doing their best to bracket out their own assumptions, to move beyond any attendant preconceptions. IPA requires a researcher to reflect on the interpretations of an individual's experience and that of the phenomena being considered (Smith et al., 2009).

According to Finlay (2003), reflexivity plays a critical part in the process throughout an IPA study. Researchers must be aware of the changes that arise within their own preconceptions as encounters are made, so that they can best understand the phenomena being investigated. It is practising this awareness which ultimately contributes to bringing about a new and necessary understanding of data (Finlay, 2003:108).

Bearing this in mind throughout, I was supported by my supervisors, who assisted me in moving beyond the constraints of my past knowledge, helping

me to use it reflectively by closely examining meanings, discovering tensions and engendering a greater sense of openness.

Notably, being reflective was particularly important in this study since I was so closely involved in the Intervention and there was a power disparity between myself and the participants. The process of analysing and interpreting data and the findings required me to be reflective for a significant part of the process. I had several discussions with my supervisors which helped me to explore and reflect on my position and consider how this may have influenced participants' responses, myself and the data.

Indeed, the discussion further helped me to make sense of the lived experience of the participants and to critically examine and recognise my role within the process. I acknowledge that my view on what constitutes good Early Childhood education may have influenced my analysis of the data. Although such personal and professional beliefs can never be bracketed out completely, it is the similarity, or discrepancy, from those of the participant which became a matter of reflection and enquiry for me. Because of IPA and my discussions, I became more sensitive to potential bias and my position within the research and I tried to minimise these during each stage. This perhaps highlights the tensions involved in researching the lived experience, in particular the duality of being both inside and outside.

3.20: Ethical considerations

Within all research investigations, ethical considerations regarding the protection of participants is a vital matter of concern (Pring, 2000; Punch 1994). As an Early Years consultant in Midtown, I am well known within the

field. I selected the nursery setting because I had not had any previous contact with it through my consultancy work. Consequently, I did not know the participants beforehand. I was very aware of the fact that I was a researcher, but also a consultant. I was mindful that the participants may say things to please me as a powerful individual, so I tried to stay away from asking them leading questions or giving them insight into any of my personal opinions (Hammersley, 2006).

Within this context, the issue of trust is fundamental. In my role as researcher I am the facilitator, as well as the interviewer, and as such I must listen attentively and be respectful of all the participants' opinions. Whether I agree with them or not, I cannot permit my perception to interfere with the research process.

While I acknowledge that in the duality of my role it may not be possible to completely get rid of all conflicts of interest, every effort was made to identify and reduce the impact of any conflict of interest towards the participants used in this study. The position of power that I held was a hugely influential one that I had to consider and reconsider, so that the study allowed the participants to share their viewpoints and opinions.

The participants in this study attended an information session where they were given details about the purpose and process of the research. They were encouraged to ask questions about the research process and their involvement. During the information session, it was made clear to the participants that taking part was voluntary. They could pull out of the research at any point before the data had been examined, without having to give a reason.

Once consent forms were signed and returned, the participants were assigned pseudonyms. This ensured that only I could identify the participants. It was made clear to all participants that their data would be anonymised. The context in which the research took place was in the same nursery in which they work. The research itself, in terms of methodology and subject matter, was not likely to increase the potential vulnerability of participants. However, it was expected that this study might affect the level of openness from participants during the experience.

As a way of mitigating this, after each group session the participants were encouraged to comment on how they felt about the experience, share any concerns and ask questions about the process. This allowed me to check that the process had not affected any of the participants in adverse ways. Participants were also able to talk to me independently after each stage group session if they wanted to further discuss any concerns arising from the experience. Participants were informed that the nursery manager, who had received specialist supervision and coaching training, was also on hand to discuss issues if necessary.

There was a debriefing of participants after each group session. This was a useful way to remind them of the important points raised during our discussions and the purpose of the study and the participant's role. This process allowed the participants to fully engage and feel comfortable about their levels of involvement. The emotional well-being and interests of the participants also remained a priority throughout.

3.21: Credibility

In seeking to establish the credibility of this study, I was aware of how closely involved I was in the Intervention and how this may have influenced responses by the participants, as well as my own view of what constitutes good Early Years education. This was partly counter-balanced by an external independent evaluation of the effect that the group discussions were having on participants. The meetings took place in June 2013 at the nursery and the participants were divided into two groups. The external consultant talked to the groups about their experiences and provided a written report. In this report, the EYPs' perceptions clearly match with how I have portrayed them (Appendix S, External Consultant's Report).

Table 4: Sample of external consultant's report

1. The whole staff is feeling more confident, more motivated, and enjoying their job more – this has had a very positive impact on the children's learning and well-being – 'it's opened our eyes!'
2. The process, and the researcher's support, has helped everyone feel good at their job, leaving all appreciative of the opportunity.
3. There seems to have been a significant impact on the team's feelings about themselves as reflective practitioners, and their ability and enthusiasm to learn. (During the external consultant's visit, they were talking about other learning opportunities they would like to explore).

3.22: Summary

In summary, this chapter gives a detailed description of the study's research methodology. Qualitative methodology and IPA methods were used to illustrate the phenomenon of my Group Intervention on EYPs and the impact that it had upon their professional practice, knowledge, thinking and understanding. The participant sample was made up of four individuals. Four data collection methods were selected, including semi-structured interviews, fieldwork notes, journal entry and focus group interviews.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore how the understanding of children's learning changes among four Early Years Practitioners (EYPs), following their participation in a series of group discussions. My role is to examine any changes and the factors which cause them. In this context, 'changes in understanding' refers to how the participants think they have changed in relation to their work. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is used to analyse their views, after the Group Intervention.

This chapter begins with a detailed description of the superordinate themes and sub-themes which emerge from the IPA. Research questions 1 and 2, the master themes of which are highlighted because of the cross-case analysis, are then discussed. Quotes to illustrate the 'lived experiences' of the EYPs are also presented alongside my interpretative comments. This is followed by a summary of the main findings.

4.1: Results

Themes emerge from the group analysis discussed in Chapter 3. Two prominent superordinate themes, underpinned by less abstract and more contextualised sub-themes, emerge from analysis of the transcripts – these are A Perceived Sense of Inadequacy and Re-evaluating Assumptions. A Perceived Sense of Inadequacy is associated with the EYPs' perceptions of their work and exposes the connections between their theoretical knowledge,

fears and practice. Re-evaluating Assumptions relates to the EYPs' practice, highlighting the relationship between their assumptions, emotional engagement, and practice as a team.

The EYPs' sense of inadequacy seems somewhat greater than it need be – it gives the impression that it relates to their inability to implement the EYFS goals, and the idea that they appear to have insufficient knowledge of child development.

The different sub-themes which emerge are 4.2.2: A Perceived Lack of Knowledge, Skills and Confidence; 4.2.3: Fear of Failure; and 4.2.4: Technical Approach. Regarding the superordinate theme of Re-evaluating Assumptions, the sub-themes which became evident are 4.3.1: Examining Implicit Beliefs; 4.3.2: Changing Emotional Engagement; and 4.3.3: Becoming a Team. These sub-themes do not occur in isolation – they are intertwined with one another, making up a phenomenological whole.

Figures 1 and 2, which now follow, contain hierarchal trees. These show the superordinate and sub-themes referred to above:

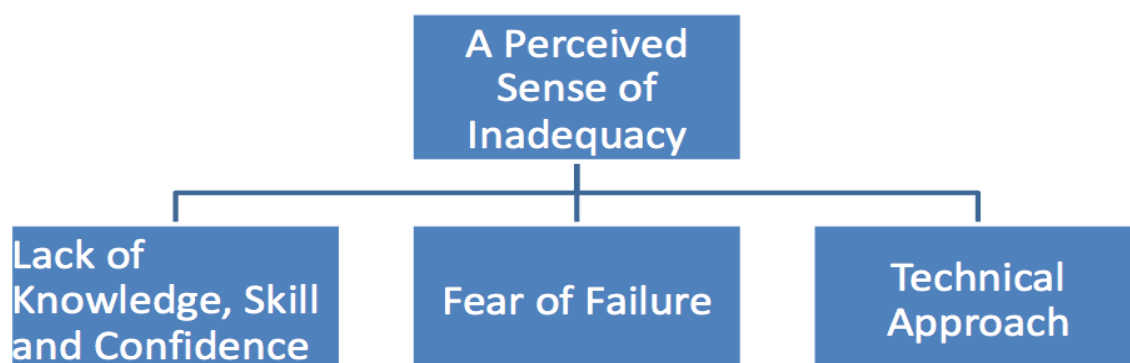


Figure 1: Hierarchal tree for superordinate theme A Perceived Sense of Inadequacy.

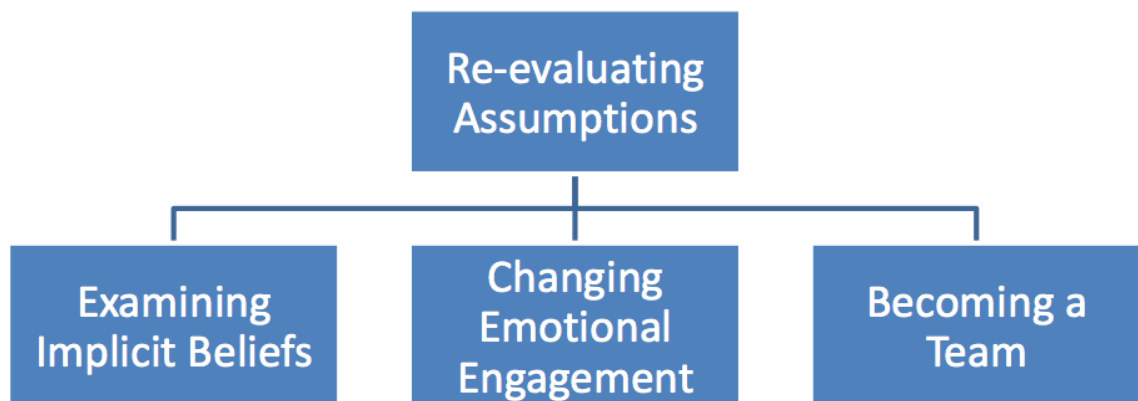


Figure 2: Hierarchical tree for superordinate theme Re-evaluating Assumptions

4.2 A Perceived Sense of Inadequacy

4.2.1 Research question 1

How would a discussion group initiative impact on Early Years Practitioners' observations in relation to the perception of themselves and their practice?

Central to this first research question is the superordinate theme A Perceived Sense of Inadequacy. It seeks to determine whether, because of this study, the EYPs think they have changed in relation to their work. In essence, it considers their skill-set and asks if it enables them to carry out their tasks effectively. These skills demand that EYPs continuously observe, assess and plan for the children, measured against the EYFS goals. To answer this question, it is important to highlight the prevailing thoughts of the four participants throughout this study.

4.2.2 A Perceived Lack of Knowledge, Skills and Confidence

The EYPs' accounts show how their lack of knowledge, skills and confidence is apparent in their recollections. All the EYPs report that they felt their own knowledge and understanding of child development, and the Observation, Assessment and Planning process, was limited. This led to a lack of confidence to plan appropriately for the children. Their recollections imply a sense of inadequacy about not having the skill-set required to do the job. This, in turn, seems to contribute to a lack of confidence in effectively implementing the EYFS goals.

I will first look at the experiences of Denise. Before the Group Intervention, Denise lacked knowledge of child development, resulting in a lack of understanding about how children learn and how she could further support their ideas and explorations. It also indicates that she lacked confidence in observing children, due to her perceived emphasis on observational outcomes. It is evident that the Group Intervention allowed Denise to develop her understanding by enabling her to interact with her own experience and the ideas of others. Increases in knowledge and skills are associated with collaborative learning. Thus, from a Vygotskyian perspective, Denise's understanding of schema theory can be seen as a dynamic process resulting from her negotiating her interpretations with others, thereby allowing her to act more effectively.

According to Vygotsky (1978), such understanding is constructed initially on a social plane before it can be internalised and developed as the learners engage in social and cultural activities. Here Denise describes how the Group Intervention helps to facilitate conceptual change:

I think I have always thought of schemas when I write observations. I

had always thought, 'Oh, that is a schema'. But I never thought to include it. But now, I think my whole outlook of writing observations is, 'Look, oh, that is a schema', or 'How could I enable the children to do it more', or 'What are they doing?' Not thinking, 'Oh, this child is really being a pain in the neck', but more, 'There must be a reason why they want to do that'.

The results of this study show that, before the Group Intervention, Kate lacked observational skills in describing and recording how children were learning. They also indicate that Kate lacked confidence in her ability to master writing observation and needed reassurance. It is evident that Kate's confidence to carry out observations was affected by several factors, including lack of experience, her fear of getting it wrong, and lack of support from team members. This would suggest that the Group Intervention helped Kate to establish and develop her observational practice.

There is a direct link between the Group Intervention, the improvements in her practice, and the changing culture of the nursery. After the Group Intervention, Kate shows more willingness to write observations, not caring about her mistakes. The task is found to be within her own zone of proximal development and, with help from others, she extends her understanding to undertake the tasks of OAP independently.

In the following example, Kate points to how her confidence develops, so that she is more able to describe meaningful learning:

I am finding now that I am writing more observations, whereas before I would struggle with them. I would write loads then cross them out. Now I feel confident, I can write up my observations...we have been observing two of our key children a week and I have been adding my observations to the board. Whereas before I held back, now it has given me the confidence to write more observations.

This study finds that, before the Group Intervention, Julie underestimated

the children's potential and ability, resulting in her having lower expectations – specifically when the children did not have spoken language. It also indicates that Julie's lack of understanding about how children communicate may have influenced her assessment of their abilities.

Afterwards, she can better understand the child's involvement signals, such as facial expressions, and provide appropriately for that child. Zuckerman (2007) suggests that both the adult's, and the child's, zone of proximal development is affected when the adult knows when the child might need help. She argues that when adults focus on what is present in the child at the moment of meeting, connecting the fragments of the experience into knowledge of their self-identity, it leads to higher mental functions, as is presented in the extract below.

I found out that the child that I observed I knew a lot more about than I thought I did and it has taken me to new levels of observing and knowing that child and looking deeper into what they are doing...like Laura with the flapping, when I see it now I try to think 'Why is she doing that, is she excited?' I observe her facial expression and maybe lead her into something that will keep her engaged throughout the day.

Similarly, Erica's account shows an increase in her confidence about her beliefs and knowledge of children, resulting in her acting more confidently after the Group Intervention. It is evident that Erica's perceptions of learning are associated with her ability to make connections between play and learning. It is possible that Erica's practice is influenced by other factors, such as her relationships with colleagues.

The study finds that, after the Group Intervention, the EYPs report higher confidence in their individual knowledge of the children. Interestingly, the study also finds that less experienced EYPs are more confident in relation to

OAP.

I feel more confident now. I feel like I am working with children that I actually know. Before, I might have thought, 'I've not got a clue what that child is doing – I do not know why he is roaming around the trucks', but, actually, when you break it down, I do know my children.

The report from the external moderator finds that the Group Intervention had a positive impact on how the participants feel about their work. They describe how 'everyone feels confident about what they are doing' and 'we have had many light bulb moments that Stella picks up from what we have said and we can see the learning'.

Both groups articulate changes in their understanding towards children's learning. They report improvements in personal attributes such as level of interest, motivation, pedagogical knowledge and confidence. Most of the participants indicate that they feel supported by the Group Intervention and that they are more confident about their abilities. They credit their engagement in the Group Intervention as a reason for this.

Both groups indicate that they start to take more notice, stating 'one child was jumping from crate to crate, before we would have just noticed it, now we realise she was exploring with distance' (External moderator's report).

The EYPs were asked which aspects of the Group Intervention support their ability to increase their skills. They cite being able to transfer the knowledge gained in the discussions to their practice, acting and feeling more confident about their capabilities.

4.2.3: Fear of Failure

The second sub-theme under A Perceived Sense of Inadequacy is Fear of Failure. The study finds that the EYPs' fears essentially stem from a lack of confidence, which results from limited knowledge and skills. So, fear of failure and lack of confidence are associated with a sense of inadequacy. This is experienced by all the EYPs in question. An outline of how these manifest is presented below.

The findings show that Denise's confidence in her ability to manage her work influences her underlying fears of self-doubt and anxiety. They also indicate that her personal evaluation of the situation relates to her fear of failing to meet required expectations. Other factors underlying her fear relate to feeling exposed to the group and the prospect of failing the children – this has a negative impact on her professional identity. This suggests that the Group Intervention helps Denise to review her own performance, enabling her to push past her underlying fears. From a Vygotskyian perspective, following the ZPD, the Group Intervention helped Denise to move between the known and the unknown without the risk of failure in exploring new ways.

I mean, he didn't [my key child] have any speech, and I think my problem was that I had another child with no speech. My key-work group grew suddenly...I had two bilingual ones, that were also two, and my key child was challenging. I think that was the problem. And I didn't know where to go from the speech point of view because I was struggling with it. So, to present it, I just felt like I was failing. I think I was so caught up with, 'I want to help this child, I can't do it', I really think I should rethink on what I'm doing. Maybe I should...I mean, I got to that point where I thought, 'Maybe I should not be in childcare'.

The findings show that Kate, like Denise, also had a fear of being seen as incompetent, resulting in her placing limits on her capabilities. It is evident that, after the Group Intervention, Kate still has a fear of talking in front of the

group – however, it is greatly reduced. The analysis establishes that the Group Intervention helped Kate to work through her fears and develop her communication skills, in ways that go beyond her own perception:

It is still daunting, standing up saying if you have produced good enough work...it is that sense of achievement, I suppose, that I have done it – can do it. I am just like everybody else, really, it's just that I'm shy.

Similarly, Julie's account reveals her expectation of failure and concerns about its consequence, which, in turn, affects her ability to reflect deeply on what she has observed. This establishes a strong link between fears of failure and worry of collaborating on prescribed tasks, which play a part in determining Julie's evaluations. Worry is also found to correlate to shyness and fear of negative feedback from colleagues.

I was worried in case it was wrong...I don't know how it could be wrong because I'm just writing what I saw.

Further analysis of the findings also points to instances where Erica felt threatened that her colleagues would know more than she did, resulting in her not being open to other viewpoints and opinions. It is evident that, after the Group Intervention, Erica comes to accept her colleagues' comments and perspectives rather than dismissing their insights. Erica is influenced by other factors, such as her attitude to her own learning, and fear that her inadequate knowledge will cause her to lose face. This implies that the Group Intervention allowed Erica to explore what she was doing wrong, leading to her learning from her mistakes and the perspectives of others.

You do not know my key child.... that is not what they're doing. How

can you tell?' Now, I'm like, 'No, bring it on. Let me know what you know because I'm seriously missing something'. I might be missing something out, but, before, I would not have been like that...if someone was saying something that I did not know, I would say I knew that and then beat myself up because they had said it but, now, I'm just like, 'Please let me know what my children are doing'.

It is interesting to note that the external moderator's report makes no reference to participants' fears of attending the Group Intervention. There is no indication that the participants found any aspects of the Group Intervention difficult. However, Erica does mention the meeting in her interview, stating 'when we had the lady come to visit for you, we all done amazingly, well we all benefited, not just me. The lady came and asked questions about how we felt and Jackie started it and before you knew it we were all contributing'.

This is an encouraging finding as the participants' decreasing fear of failure is a result of their involvement in the Group Intervention and the targeted 'scaffolding' support they receive. This omission may also be explained by the participants' desire to become better key-persons and practitioners and their need to deepen their pedagogical knowledge and understanding. It is also possible that their own fears of failure no longer exist at the time of talking to the moderator; for example, they may no longer have perceived the Group Intervention as unsafe. Vygotsky's theoretical framework asserts that one learns from one's failures and not from avoiding them. The findings from the external moderator indicate that the Group Intervention provides the participants with a risk-free supportive context in which they can confidently identify gaps in their knowledge and understanding.

4.2.4: Technical Approach

The last sub-theme linked to A Perceived Sense of Inadequacy – Technical Approach – refers to times when EYPs act as though they are technicians following a manual, as opposed to showing dexterity at making professional judgements. Each of the subsequent examples from the data will show that the EYPs lacked understanding about how to professionally interpret their observations.

The findings for this study reveal that Denise lacked confidence in the way in which she implemented the OAP cycle, resulting in her only observing behaviours known to her. It indicates that when faced with a play or learning situation that she does not (confidently) understand, her approach is affected. This leads her to focus on observing the content of the EYFS, rather than developing her understanding of the process. It also shows that Denise brought her personal ideas about children's learning to her work. In the extract below, Denise expresses how she starts to pay more attention to the nature of play and learning in her observations:

Now I know I will find something, where in the old days [before the Group Intervention] I used to just think, 'Urgh, you are [the child] just sitting there doing nothing...I'm not watching them, what a waste of time...' When now my whole outlook comes to the point where I think, 'Oh, mmmmm, let's watch them. Then I get my observations. So, in the end, I've got everything I need, that week, if I watch them.

Not dissimilarly, Kate expresses positive shifts in her interactions with the children during her observations. The findings indicate improvements in her pedagogical approach, such as viewing the children's learning from a holistic perspective, resulting in her moving away from making unnecessary interruption in a child's play. The findings also show that, before the Group

Intervention, Kate's interaction with children was characterised by low-level risk practices. The evidence suggests that the Group Intervention influenced Kate's perception and the decisions she makes about the kind of interactions she is going to have with the children in her care:

Well, like I said, more and more observations, and not to intervene - let them take their play to a new level, if you know what I mean? Not to spoil it by going, 'Oh, what colour? How many?' But, at the same time, learning from them. It's just watching and learning from them...if you intervene too early they'll just get up and leave and disperse somewhere else...they sometimes bring you into their play – bring you into their little world, whatever their activity is, and they're asking you questions, or instead of me going, 'Oh, what you doing?' or 'What you not doing?' sort of thing. So, yeah, it's about them trusting and letting you come into their play.

For Julie, changes relate more to acting on her observations, resulting in her using this information to find out about the children's knowledge. The findings indicate that Julie is more confident in making a professional judgement based on what she knows after the Group Intervention. In her account below, Julie comments that her observations encourage critical thinking and questioning of what she has observed. The evidence suggests that the Group Intervention had an impact on her self-awareness – particularly how it influenced the way in which she pays closer attention to her observations:

I'm doing a lot more watching than I used to, or when I'm watching now, I'm thinking, 'Why are they doing that? Or how could they do it differently?' instead of just watching them play. I feel like my brain is always ticking over, trying to help them.

Erica identifies that she adjusts her interactions to better match the child's

interest or needs. The findings reveal that, before the Group Intervention, she explicitly engaged in evaluating the process of her observations based on the EYFS outcomes, resulting in her not thinking of how she was being informed about their next steps. The analysis shows that she lacked understanding about how to use the information gathered from observation in the assessment and planning process. Rather, her focus was on where the children made measurable achievements, in relation to the EYFS goals, whilst paying no attention to how the information about the child's learning would inform her subsequent pedagogical practice. The evidence suggests that the Group Intervention influenced Erica's responses and subsequent interactions with the children:

I'm not interfering in their play as much...with most of my key children, I used to just think, 'Oh, they're not doing very much', or 'I'm worried about why they're not covering this area and doing stuff like that'. Now, I'm just like, 'Well, they don't need to cover it all. You just need to watch what they're doing and their interests'.

It is evident from the external moderator's report that the Group Intervention had a 'significant impact on the EYPs feelings about themselves as reflective practitioners and their ability and enthusiasm to learn'. The report shows, that after the Group Intervention, the participants indicate that they feel more confident observing children and have deepened their pedagogical knowledge. They describe how their approach to teaching has changed, commenting: 'We come back to the activity, review it, and see how it develops. We make sure that within six weeks all children are observed in depth and we talk about them every week in staff meeting, so about 11

children each week (plus other children will be discussed as things naturally crop up). We all contribute' (External moderator's report).

The report shows that all participants can implement this new way of working. Both groups describe how they observe together, resulting in less experienced EYPs being supported by more skilled EYPs who can share their practice. It also shows that the participants feel they are more able to spontaneously develop their teaching and interaction styles, resulting in the participants gaining more self-direction about their practice and being less anxious about only focusing on the content of the EYFS. The report comments: 'They are more confident and relaxed about relating their knowledge of children to the EYFS and using it to plan more purposeful next steps' and that 'they are more confident about when to stand back and when to join in'.

Both groups were asked which factors influence the positive impact on their practice. Participants comment on the support that I gave them, but also on the encouragement and help from their colleagues, which led them to build confidence and develop their practice. Another positive outcome that the external moderator reports is an increase in the participants' sense of autonomy.

4.3: Re-evaluating Assumptions

The second superordinate theme, Re-evaluating Assumptions, is intrinsic throughout the other emergent sub-themes. This is illustrated in the EYPs' lack of confidence when implementing the EYFS requirements. It refers to

the ways in which the EYPs' views of themselves, and their practice, may have changed during and following the Group Intervention. Within this are three sub-themes: Examining Implicit Beliefs, Changing Emotional Engagement, and Becoming a Team. This section addresses attempts to ascertain which aspects of the group approach the EYPs think have brought about a change in their understanding and their professional practice.

4.3.1: Examining Implicit Beliefs

In this context, Examining Implicit Beliefs describes how the EYPs become more aware of how their beliefs guide and shape their practice, interactions and expectations. It also refers to ways in which the EYPs consider and identify which of their beliefs act as barriers to improving their practice. The analysis of the data reveals that, after the Group Intervention, the EYPs begin to individually question their beliefs. They re-evaluate what they had previously believed and understood about themselves in the areas of child development and learning. Significant changes are therefore seen in their pedagogical beliefs over the course of the intervention.

The study finds that changes in Denise's attitude towards two-year-olds are influenced by several factors, such as her own attitude about children's learning, her colleagues and the Group Intervention itself. It indicates that Denise has strong beliefs about children's learning that were challenged and addressed during the Group Intervention. In the extract below, Denise describes how she changed her attitude:

I had a bad attitude about children...Terrible Twos I called them. I'm going to the Terrific Twos course tomorrow...I think that you should

not judge things – you see something, you think, ‘Ooooooh, two-year-olds’. What you should do is look, observe, and see why they are doing it. I think that is the big key for me – why did that child do that...how can I bring that child on?

The study finds that another of Denise’s quotes uncovers modifications in her practice and changes to her style of interaction. Her participation in the Group Intervention and exposure to the group enables Denise to make significant changes in her understanding, leading to an impact on her practice. The practice also shifted her perception of children’s learning:

I realised he is not doing it to be a pain, he’s doing it for a reason – my attitude changed...not that I didn’t want to be around him, it was just that I felt that I was failing him. When I got the saucepans you should’ve seen the smile on his face. It was like, ‘Yes!’ And I join in ‘cause I’m like that, and we’re banging the saucepans together and he’s loving it, and he’s thinking ‘Wow, I can do what I want to do’...It wasn’t him, it was me.

Despite experiencing this theme differently, the findings show that, after the Group Intervention, Kate finds new ways of accepting and dealing with the limitations she feels about her approach. It indicates that Kate’s beliefs about herself influence her thoughts and practice. This is partly because the Group Intervention provided Kate with a space to share concerns, to reflect and learn from others through group collaboration:

Whereas, before, I was quite shy...it was making me I feel that I wasn’t being heard...but that’s my insecurities...I’m open to talk about it and come out and say, ‘Look, this is what I think, and my opinions do count’...and that’s it really, just things like that...I’m getting better all the time. And every time we talk about it, it’s another level that I’ve achieved, another level that I’ve gone on to.

In contrast to Kate, her colleagues focus on reflecting on their attitudes

and interpretations about the children. Kate's concern is primarily with how the others perceive her. This, in turn, affects how she views herself. However, she later reports that she re-examines herself and her capabilities. This leads her to become more aware of her own beliefs and practice – a progression which changes the way that she sees herself as an EYP. She explicitly states that she becomes able to challenge her beliefs about her abilities.

Before the Group Intervention, she did not value herself and thought of herself as not making valid contributions. By the end, however, she thinks of her contributions to the discussions as worthy. It is worth mentioning here that this model of group intervention supports all the EYPs to question their practice in a non-threatening way. It is evident that it also helps them to reconstruct their conceptual understandings. This leads to a realisation that single characteristics, such as shyness, do not define one's capabilities.

In Julie's case, she expresses shifts in her own thinking and understanding. The findings show that she begins to reflect on her practice and the effect her beliefs are having on the children's learning, making her more open and willing to explore new ideas. Instead of settling for simplistic presumptions and worrying about specific behaviours, post-intervention she shows a clearer and more developed approach when trying to understand them. The evidence suggests that the Group Intervention influenced a change in Julie's perception and understanding of particular children:

My perceptions changed I think...like Laura would be flapping away and I'd be constantly thinking, 'Well, why is she doing that? Why is she doing this?' And, now, I've got a few answers...to encourage her to get away from that and encourage her to do another activity...I think it's excitement sometimes; it's a few things.

The analysis shows how much more reflective Julie has become. By simply questioning her assumptions and beliefs, she is newly-inclined to inquire into her professional understanding and her implementation of the EYFS goals. She goes as far as to conclude that her beliefs may have hindered the children's learning. Once she begins to observe them differently, she anticipates greater strides in their development. This willingness to challenge herself makes her feel enthused about her work and assists her professional growth. The evidence suggests that the Group Intervention had a direct impact on Julie's ability to reflect on how she observes and what she knows and believes about particular children:

I think all my children will develop differently now, I observe them differently. I think I'm helping them more. In a way, I feel like it has just given me a boost...to help them with new challenges.

Similarly, Erica describes a new attitude towards her work, stating that her sense of identity seems much clearer than before the intervention. She appears to be looking for opportunities to communicate constructively with the children, even during mundane tasks. The evidence suggests that the Group Intervention influenced Erica's perception of her work and that she has a more attentive attitude afterwards:

My attitude towards it now is much clearer. I am just so much more positive about it. I'm not just looking at children and thinking, 'Oh God, I've got to change a nappy, I've got to do this potty training'. Even though I've got to do them, I'm always talking to them. It's just changed my approach in the way that I work...it's just helped me a lot, just to understand the children.

The external moderator's report shows that the EYPs took their involvement in the Group Intervention seriously, openly discussing changes

in their beliefs and pedagogical practice. One comment is: 'There seems to have been a significant impact on the team's feelings about themselves as reflective practitioners and their ability and enthusiasm to learn.'

It is evident that the Group Intervention helped EYPs to face and challenge their beliefs about children's learning – through reflective dialogue they improve their practice. Both groups of EYPs indicate that the experience of the Group Intervention changed the way they view children.

4.3.2: Changing Emotional Engagement

The term Changing Emotional Engagement, the second sub-theme under Re-evaluating Assumptions, refers to the EYPs' ability to reflect on and engage with their emotions. It also relates to how their own emotional engagement may supersede the child's emotional needs. The EYPs describe how their emotions influence their decision-making about what they believe to constitute effective learning.

For example, Denise speaks about how she becomes more attuned and responsive to the needs of the children at the nursery. She starts to notice subtle cues from the children and this helps her to respond in ways that allow her to better engage with and regulate her emotional reactions. The study finds that, after the Group Intervention, Denise is more emotionally engaged through her interactions. This helps her to create a more appropriate learning environment so that the children can explore. This contrasts with before the Group Intervention, when she expressed several difficulties in coping with her key children. It is evident that the Group Intervention enabled Denise to observe the process of learning and respond more sensitively. These

changes in her interactions led to her being able to tolerate messy play and adapt to a more child-centred approach, as this extract illustrates:

I love sensory play. I love mess. I do like mess, but I thought, you know when, like, you want all your sticking bits together? It used to really irritate me, you know? But, now, it's like, 'Oh, they have to do it, you have to let them do it.' And when someone goes, 'They're doing...' they have to do it, leave them, leave them!

Kate describes how she starts to involve the children in planning, through asking them questions about their ideas, resulting in her being less 'hands on' (adult-directed) and more able to follow the children's lead. It is evident that the Group Intervention enabled Kate to provide a range of activities that are mainly based on the children's interests, rather than her own. After the Group Intervention, Kate is more emotionally connected and able to take responsibility for planning activities within the nursery. This establishes an important link between Kate's interactions in relation to her emotional engagement and her awareness of the children's perspectives. In the example that follows, Kate describes how she begins to respond more flexibly to the children's interests and motivations:

I'm planning for activities more now...involving myself a lot more in creative activities. I like to do creative activities, involving and asking the children plans for what they would like, or what they would do...not just adult-led all the time. It's getting their view...'What shall we do with this and what should we do with that?' Not so hands-on...we had a box of shredded paper...the children just wanted to throw it at each other, so that's what we done. We had a great time, just throwing it at it each other and it was lovely...They're laughing and joking and running around with paper everywhere.

Further analysis on Changing Emotional Engagement shows positive effects on the EYPs' confidence and beliefs about their role and the

significant impact this has on their emotional engagement with children. The findings also show that the Group Intervention provided Julie with professional development opportunities, which in turn improve her interactions. It is evident that the Group Intervention enabled Julie to increase her confidence in her professional teaching abilities and this led to a new zest about her work. The study finds clear links between changing emotional engagement and job satisfaction. Changing emotional engagement is more strongly associated with an increased sense of professional autonomy. The account below shows that, after the Group Intervention, Julie feels more competent in engaging with meeting the children's needs:

I feel like I'm more professional. I feel like I'm not just a nursery nurse that looks after some children... I feel I have more of a meaning...helping them to learn... I feel a lot more confident and I feel I have more of a role with my children. I feel like I'm a better key person than I was before... I feel like I'm meeting their needs more when it comes to activities...building relationships, meal times, bonding with parents – I think I've come forward in all of it since it's [the Group Intervention] been going on.

Changing emotional engagement also correlates positively to other factors such as ability to engage, willingness to be involved in the Group Intervention, expressing own views and being involved in decision-making related to the role. The relationship between changing emotional engagement and understanding children's significant learning is relatively high among all participants. After the Group Intervention, the EYPs were encouraged to make decisions about their levels of interaction, rather than focusing only on outcomes, and they reported more meaningful observations. This would suggest that EYPs who feel that they can make decisions about

their work, rather than following prescribed outcomes, are more likely to engage and less likely to disengage.

In this example, Erica's emotional engagement is linked to her personal understanding of her role. She describes how she moves away from solely engaging in 'adult-led' activities, which focus play towards specific early learning goals, to those advocating the importance of self-initiated play. Her perception of her role is strongly associated with the prescribed way in which tasks are performed at the nursery.

This evidence suggests that becoming more emotionally engaged can help EYPs to become more effective in their practice and increase their understanding of the learning process. From a Vygotskyian perspective, Erica can be seen not only to maximise the children's opportunity to engage with their play, but also act as a role model to other adults, thereby recognising appropriate learning. In the extract below, Erica describes how she no longer directs how activities should run:

Like today, this morning I done the Creative Table and I just done normal water-paint with watercolours, and then I thought, 'No, I'm not going to stop there, I'm going to do something else.' And we did the play dough, and I got all the play dough out and all the cups out with the children. I was like, 'Come on then.' And the temp lady was like, 'Oh, we have to do this.' And I was like, 'No, just let them do it.' And I was just standing back, and even that, normally I'd be like, 'No', like I'd be pretty hands-on (adult-led) with them, but I just stood there, I was like, 'Ok, fill that cup up for me'. I was asking open-ended questions, discussions about what we're doing...it was amazing! That's actually how I could see that I've changed a lot, because before I'd be like, 'No! You have to put the cup properly'.

The external consultant's report shows that many of the EYPs spoke about how good they felt about their work, commenting; 'The process and Stella's support has helped everyone feel good in their jobs' (External

moderator's report). The study found evidence that the Group Intervention had a positive impact on the EYPs' levels of involvement. Strong links were found to exist between style of interaction and beliefs about self and how children learn. Vygotsky's (1978) ideas about the role of adult interaction in the learning process point to the adult capacity to engage children in learning interdependent connections between the context and adult role. Central to his idea is the notion that learning is shaped by context, culture and tools. All learning takes place in a cultural context in which different levels of interaction are mediated by relationships, shared beliefs, knowledge and interpersonal interaction.

4.3.3: Becoming a Team

Here the analysis reveals that the EYPs start to work towards shared goals. This influences their overall communication and understanding. Specifically, it identifies a range of factors which encourage them to view themselves more as a team. Working together, sharing perspectives, and showing support for others, are all found to have an impact on their active involvement.

In this respect, reports about improved communication with other team members are prevalent. All the EYPs report changes in how they communicate with each other, which leads to changes in how they work. It is evident from her comments that Denise feels the group discussions have helped to create a sense of belonging, which enables them to operate as a team. This would suggest that the Group Intervention provided the team with

the support to work together, share knowledge, listen to each other and rely on one another for support. The following examples illustrate the different ways in which the EYPs increase their communication. The evidence suggests that the Group Intervention had a direct influence on the development of team work and Denise's engagement with the team:

I think that one of the things that have happened in the group sessions with you is that we've become more of a team, although we were always a team, I think the discussion side of things increased our communication.

Kate describes how other members of the team begin to provide her with updates. This leads to more open communication, which enables the EYPs to share their ideas and opinions without fear. It also creates a sense of shared responsibility. The evidence suggests that the Group Intervention had an impact on Kate's ability to discuss and listen to others. There is a clear and strong correlation between the Group Intervention and the team working together to maximise their own learning.

If I am not in that day or I am on holiday, when I return everyone will come up to me and say 'Did you know that he can do this or did you know that he can do that?' No I did not know. They can tell me things that I obviously have not seen. I am not worried about going up to them [my colleagues] and asking questions, whereas before I would not, I would just sit back. Now they advise me on how I go about it.

Julie's account shows her growing confidence in her own capacity to work together with others while learning about the children. In the example below, Julie illustrates her engagement and willingness to listen to the reflections of others:

Everyone just comes together really and they are quite respectful of your opinions and when you are talking they listen. We are in the

room most of the time together, we are always saying 'I have just seen that or he was doing this and she was doing that'.

Similarly, Erica reports on how her involvement in group discussions with her colleagues challenged her thinking. She describes how others support her through the process. This suggests that the Group Intervention enabled her to move beyond her practice of working alone, to analysing her observations much more critically:

We were going through the planning and I said 'Look girls, I need help with this' as I had watched this little girl for over an hour and I really did not know what she was doing. The staff got involved in a discussion and all of a sudden it clicked, I was like 'Enclosures, she is putting the people into the house.' So it was all of us coming together.

The analysis finds that sharing perspectives is an important factor in bringing the group together. The data indicates that it allows the EYPs to share their ideas and enables thinking – this leads to an increase in the skills and knowledge they gain directly from each other. Denise describes how they begin to solve their problems in collaborative ways. This leads to them reflecting on and challenging their assumptions as they find new ways of thinking. Encouragingly, the evidence suggests a shift away from their own assumptions to ones which empower them to develop their understanding and find solutions, suggesting that the Group Intervention is critical for the EYPs in this process:

I was concerned about her. Laura, my gut feeling was it wasn't autism.... I'd worked with two boys previously, they all asked me, and I said: 'I don't think so, but I don't know why she's flapping. I know, let's have a discussion with, erm, Stella'. And I was really relieved, to be honest, that the girls had brought it forward and I knew it was going to be a challenging discussion, and I knew as a group we would all put our input in. And really between us we did really find the

answer. And we done it as... as like two or three... like two of us together, then two of us again or two over here, but I think one of the big lessons is, girls, don't do it individually, do it as a group. Erm, because you find out so much more, because we're all working in the same room that each one of us missing something out.

Kate's account reveals how she begins to shift her perspective and take up those of others when she makes decisions about her planning and next steps in learning. Her account demonstrates that the advice she is given by others is considered by her to be valid enough to follow. This leads to her considering the issues from a much broader viewpoint and allows her to capture learning from her colleagues:

It is like I said before, if [my colleagues] see things that I have not, they tell me – 'Did you know that he can do this?' And we talk about it. I am often given information that I have not noticed before and I use it to plan for the next steps for him to take him on to the next level, and the next step of learning. So yeah, it's helped me a lot.

They were coming up with different sensory explorations, and stuff, and that was quite interesting to get that feedback from them...you look at things in a different light - I didn't think of it that way. And, like I said, it's very interesting, other people's opinions and the knowledge that comes out of it.

In the same vein, Erica expresses her appreciation of collaborative learning. She admits to realising that her fears started out as being a barrier to any progress, but goes on to describe ways in which the variety of insights within the group cause her to consider the different views and feel less defensive. Ultimately, she becomes less possessive about knowing about her key child and seems to demonstrate a greater sense of cohesion and respect towards her colleagues. The evidence suggests that Erica's fear of being judged is exposed during the Group Intervention. This, however, has a

positive influence on how she becomes more open to the idea of learning from others:

I used to get really frustrated. Like, I used to be like, 'You don't know my key children', like, a little bit defensive, 'That's not what they're doing, how can you tell?' Now, I'm like, 'No, bring it on. Let me know what you know'.

In relation to showing support, the analysis reveals increased confidence in communicating ideas. Julie's description points to the process as being supportive and shows that she gains a deeper understanding about her work – her confidence increases as she begins to communicate her ideas more effectively. The evidence suggests that, because of the GI, Julie is more supportive of her colleagues and this has an impact on her confidence. Between them, the participants seem to develop a sense that they should provide support and guidance to others – with the most experienced and knowledgeable others modelling this for their colleagues:

I think by helping some of the other girls here, I feel like I've grown in confidence; if they ask me something I may be able to give them a better explanation for certain things, if they want help with their children.

It is evident from the external moderator's report that the group process enables the participants to go beyond the individual. This is an unintended consequence which happened organically. Inevitably, the analysis establishes that they begin to feel part of a team through their participation and reveals numerous ways in which the process of Becoming a Team, the final sub-theme under Re-evaluating Assumptions, proves to be a prevalent aspect of this research project. The EYPs clearly testify to it being a significant factor which helps them to change their assumptions.

There are frequent descriptions about working together and these are projected in two different ways. The first is the notion of seeing things from the perspective of others, with the comment: 'They feel they talk in more depth about the children and are particularly impressed by the quality of insight brought by having all the team of eight bringing their insights' (External moderator's report).

The second is about gaining access to support that validates their professional interpretations. The external moderator's report confirms that the discussion forum helps broaden the perspectives of the EYPs and creates an awareness of their interactions with team members, thereby building a sense of personal responsibility and trust towards each other.

4.4: Summary of findings

The presentation of data in this chapter seeks to demonstrate the variety of ways in which the Group Intervention made an impact. Therefore, my conclusion is that the process of discussion is a necessary aspect of an EYP's work; it seems to be the area where the most powerful learning takes place. Participants can examine their own practice and make changes to their actions and interpretations in light of their discussions. The analysis confirms a shift after the Group Intervention in the EYPs' focus on outcomes to concentration on understanding learning. It is also of significance that none of the participants attribute their professional development to any factors other than those explored throughout this project.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

In this study, the question under discussion is: *What aspects of the group approach do Early Years Practitioners think has brought about a change in their understanding about children's learning?* In this section, the discussion points to ways in which the Group Intervention sessions make a difference and the factors which contribute to changes in the EYPs' implicit beliefs and emotional engagement. Data analysis reveals seven significant findings which the EYPs believe have occurred because of their participation.

- The GI meetings allow the EYPs to develop confidence and acquire additional knowledge.
- The GI meetings support the EYPs to acknowledge and face their fears.
- The GI supports EYPs to adopt a holistic approach and work more effectively in implementing the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).
- The GI meetings allow the EYPs to develop a new perspective and examine their existing beliefs.
- The GI supports EYPs to engage emotionally with their work.
- The GI meetings allow the EYPs to feel more informed and confident about doing observations, assessments and planning.
- The GI meetings provide EYPs with peer support.

5.1: Lack of knowledge, skills and confidence

This study addresses some important challenges faced by four Early Years Practitioners in understanding the observations they made of children's development and learning in their play. To explain why the four EYPs interpreted their observations in the way they did, the findings of Siraj-Blatchford (2010) illustrate that EYPs encounter many difficulties in understanding children's learning. Not only do many EYPs lack knowledge of child development and the unique characteristics of children, they also lack knowledge in how to implement the EYFS. Understanding the individual needs of children, and a lack of confidence, were also challenging for the four EYPs in this study.

These findings are in line with several other studies. For example, Manning-Morton (2006) finds that compartmentalising areas of learning are not helpful in supporting EYPs to develop a holistic understanding of the children. Other studies show that, when EYPs only focus on areas of learning, they may not see the complexities and connections involved in children's play (Drummond, 2012). As a result, the understanding of children's learning becomes even more challenging. Moreover, the EYPs in this study lacked essential knowledge in facilitating learning with the children. Previous studies also confirm this finding (Pascal & Bertram, 1997; Wood, 2016; Nutbrown, 2012).

Wood and Nutbrown argue that EYPs lack knowledge in implementing the EYFS. Nutbrown also claims that current training does not always equip EYPs with the knowledge and skills they need to do their job. The four EYPs in this study are found to be unaware of how to identify the significant

learning needs and interests of children. They are also unaware of how best to either support or deepen the children's learning. The Department for Education (DfE 2014:20) policy statement on the knowledge base of EYPs asserts that 'the daily experience of children in Early Years settings and the overall quality of provision depends on all practitioners having appropriate qualifications, training, skills and knowledge and a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities'.

This means that how EYPs are supported to develop and deepen their understanding, based on their observations of what children are currently interested in, is important. Pascal and Bertram suggest that EYPs need to develop pedagogical strategies, which allow them to facilitate children's learning as an integrated approach.

Integrating pedagogical strategies was seen as a challenge for the four EYPs because they lacked vital knowledge of child development and, thus, were unable to effectively implement the EYFS. This study reveals that the four EYPs' knowledge of child development varied, with different levels of understanding in implementing the EYFS. The gap between the EYPs' knowledge and implementation can perhaps be supported by professional dialogue and discussions with colleagues.

All the EYPs in this study indicate that, not only do they increase their knowledge, skills and confidence, but they also have a better understanding of themselves and the children. Therefore, by engaging in reflective discussions with each other, the four EYPs can develop their knowledge of child development and overcome these challenges.

5.2: Fear of failure

Despite differences in experience and length of time in the job, the EYPs reveal distinct similarities in relation to their fears of failure. They perceived themselves as failures and this prevented them from taking risks to develop their practice and their relationships with children. It is important to note that the Group Intervention removes two structures from the Observation, Assessment and Planning process which may have been very reassuring to EYPs in the past.

One is the structure of observations in the EYFS – this is what you look for and remember, or write down, and this is what you ignore; now they are expected to be open to everything and to ignore nothing (increasing fears). The other is the interpretation of the observation – this is what matters (developmental descriptors and Early Learning Goals) and this is irrelevant; now everything is relevant and of possible importance. Elfer and Dearnley (2007) agree that EYPs often feel anxious and fearful, particularly when forming close relationships with young children, about their own capacity to cope.

EYPs' relationships with children are important and central to children's learning, suggesting that they are involved in a social relationship with children, colleagues and parents. This is where Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development is relevant, particularly as EYPs are required through their observations to identify the moment children need support. Vygotsky's constructivist perspective on learning considers the connection between cognitive development and affective factors in learning and problem-solving. In relation to the EYPs' fear of failure during the

Observation, Assessment and Planning (OAP) process, it can be seen as an interaction between what they know and the specific observational context. What EYPs know – their perceptions, expectations, and what they take notice of during their observations – is what is revealed to them through their fears.

Prior to the Group Intervention, irrespective of the EYPs' ability, they all used the EYFS developmental descriptors as the only reference point for what to observe. This determined if they perceived a sense of success or failure. In this respect, the EYPs' fear of failure towards their observations is the outcome of consciously, or unconsciously, stimulated personal reflections of the child and the OAP process, self, and the learning situations. Based on this theoretical framework, it is possible to link fear of failure to the policy context. Links can be established regarding the EYPs' levels of anxiety to perform in the right way – to satisfy EYFS requirements, managers or Ofsted – that may influence their fear of failure in their observational tasks. How EYPs are supported to engage with their fears and develop their knowledge and skills has implications for effective practice in the EYFS.

5.3: Technical approach

Interpretations of how the four EYPs respond in this study indicate that the focus on regulation and measurement may also have influenced how they implemented the EYFS. This created tensions between the process and outcomes of play, development and learning, and the EYPs' professional and personal values. This is evident in the way EYPs interacted and intervened to

achieve outcomes within the EYFS. Tensions were also created regarding EYPs' expectations, understanding and ideas about children's learning.

Knowing the moment to intervene in children's play requires EYPs to observe and know when to support and extend it. Although the EYPs in the study support the notion of children learning through play, they are not as confident as they want to be in providing experiences to facilitate child-initiated learning. This is in line with Buldu (2010), who says that EYPs need to be knowledgeable and confident if they are to sensitively intervene to help the child to learn and progress.

In this study, the four EYPs describe characteristics of their approach as being unsure of when to intervene, when to provide appropriate support, or when to give the right answers to the child. Tensions arise from how the EYPs intervene in children's learning, and if they can introduce new knowledge and support children in developing and practising their skills. Symbolically, the EYPs use the term 'hands-on' to reveal their perceptions of their practice.

The EYFS (2014:9) states that 'each area of learning and development must be implemented through planned, purposeful play and through a mix of adult-led and child-initiated activity'. The EYPs took the term 'adult-led activities' to mean that they should take control to ensure that the children met their learning objectives. Other studies show that EYPs who facilitate learning lack understanding about the delicate balance and boundaries between child-initiated and adult-directed play. Bruce (1997) suggests that mastering the correct balance is a delicate exercise, requiring skills of observation, knowledge of the child, and child development. Stewart (2012),

in her study on the characteristics of effective learning, finds that some EYPs may take the notion of adult-directed activities to mean structured play, thereby limiting the creative and learning opportunities for children. Tensions arise because of this misinterpretation of the EYFS statutory guidance on the nature and extent of the adult's role. Indeed, in this study, two of the EYPs took the expression 'hands-on' to mean an adult-led activity, where an adult would effectively manage a child's learning. The ways in which this can affect the quality of their interactions with the children are obvious – children's initiatives and ideas are unintentionally stifled and they quickly lose interest. Perhaps, then, it is unsurprising that the EYPs repeatedly describe not knowing what kind of questions to ask the children, or how to help the children move forward. It implies that outcomes may become more important than relationships and the process of children's learning, as is seen in the approach taken by the EYPs in this study.

Moss (2014:43) concludes that 'technical practice is dominated by a technical question "what works?", and with the technique of evidence-based policy and practice supposedly able to supply the right technical answer'. He goes on to argue for a different paradigm, one which is more able to consider ethical and political practice above technical practice. In other words, evidence-based policy can only make sense when it is put into context and interpreted.

While the technical approach has the potential to increase outcomes for children, it is not without risk. In many respects, this emphasis on ticking boxes only works to create children who have been moulded into the shape which adults and cultures desire, through the mechanism of prescribed

developmental descriptors. Arguably, the developmental descriptors do not speak for themselves – to be meaningful they must be interpreted in the context of learning and interactions.

In terms of the EYPs' professional judgement, they use the developmental descriptors as absolute proof. In doing so, they avoid having to think about them once they have been seen. This finding is supported by Moss (2014), who suggests that the technical approach does little to encourage an individual's ability to connect their personal values and beliefs with their practice. This point raises questions about the way in which the developmental descriptors are assessed and the extent to which this approach may hamper the ability of EYPs to interpret such instructions. Without such considerations of one's interpretations, self-understanding will inevitably be limited, as was the case with the four EYPs at the start of this intervention. This finding reinforces Moss's (2014) call for ethical and political practice. It also links to Frost's (2011) findings that interpretations must be analysed. This may produce multiple perspectives which necessitate making political and moral judgements.

5.4: Examining implicit beliefs

In this section, I discuss how an alternative form of group supervision supported the EYPs to overcome their vulnerabilities and enabled them to re-evaluate their beliefs and assumptions. The findings from this study make a strong case for group interventions which support EYPs to examine the practices that undermine their confidence and encourage them to develop their knowledge, skill and understanding. In participating in the Group

Intervention, what is unfamiliar challenges their thinking. The EYPs are then able to move their personal and professional understanding about children's learning to a new level. In addition, the removal of the developmental descriptor as the only reference point challenges their beliefs and encourages reflection through group discussion, promoting changes in their beliefs and understanding about children and themselves.

The significant changes to their beliefs, recorded in the interview and focus group, provide further evidence that the EYPs become more reflective about how they meditate on their practice. The study finds variations across all four EYPs – from one who explicitly recognises her attitude as a factor and acknowledges her own lack of understanding, to others who deepen their understanding about children and the conditions that facilitate learning. The findings indicate that the Group Intervention helped to deepen the EYPs' perception about themselves and children's learning and enabled them to take responsibility for their practice.

The EYPs in this study move away from drawing conclusions based on one observation in isolation, to analysing shared observations as a group. They tend to consider a range of factors, which include how their style of interaction may affect children's learning, rather than blaming children for not developing. The findings from this study provide evidence that EYPs enter the workforce with misconceptions about child development. Their perceptions then guide their practice. The Group Intervention offers opportunities for examining EYPs' assumptions about children and their practice.

All the EYPs in this study report that the Group Intervention enabled them

to challenge their own understanding of themselves. They change their perceptions and attitudes, respond to others in different ways, and overcome self-doubt to become better at analysing and understanding their own reactions to children. These findings suggest that they develop the confidence to question who they are as EYPs. Shifts in the EYPs' perception and understanding feature notably in the data analysis.

Similar findings from Manning-Morton (2006), Elfer and Dearnley (2007), and Elfer (2012, 2014), identify ongoing continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities as being very important to supporting EYPs in a deeper understanding of the personal and emotional aspect of their work. All three authors suggest a change in the way professional development is delivered. They imply a move away from short one-day courses to ongoing group opportunities, which allow EYPs to develop self-awareness and to emotionally, personally and professionally engage with their practice.

These important findings link with Hamachek's (1999) view that a strong sense of self is vital if teachers are to develop and refine their further practice. Hamachek (1999:209) highlights the importance of a teacher's personal knowledge and understanding of themselves as being fundamental to their practice. He poignantly states: 'Consciously we teach what we know; unconsciously we teach who we are.' In other words, the beliefs and values that teachers hold in relation to teaching, learning and self-reflection are an important component of professional growth.

Similarly, Murphy et al. (2004) claim that it is necessary to bring implicit beliefs about teaching and learning forward to render them explicit. This may help EYPs to better engage in the process of making purposeful and

contextualised judgements. This finding concurs with the ideas advanced by Hamachek (1999) and Murphy et al. (2004), who state that personal knowledge of self, beliefs and values is necessary to enable one to improve understanding.

The findings of this study have implications for implementing the EYFS. The fact that all of the EYPs re-evaluate their assumptions to develop new understanding about children's play, development and learning suggest that the Group Intervention may be a meaningful way to address the knowledge gap in the sector.

5.6: Changing emotional engagement

The EYPs report struggling throughout the process of their observations to understand how and when they should interact with the children. After the Group Intervention, the EYPs in this study are more engaged with pedagogy and better able to improve their emotional engagement. One of the EYPs sums up the prevailing view when she says: 'I'm not interfering in their play'.

Key changes in their interactions emerge from the data. They start to use the information from their observations to inform planning. They feel more professional and engaged and they resist the constraints of the developmental descriptors. In reflecting on the Group Intervention, all the EYPs report important shifts in practice which they associate with their increased pedagogical understanding. The findings suggest that, before the Group Intervention, the EYPs engaged with their work on a surface level; afterwards they are significantly more emotionally engaged. These findings

are consistent with the study by Manning-Morton (2006), which finds that changes in pedagogical practice are strongly associated with shifts in emotional engagement. This is also in line with Elfer (2014), who finds that EYPs became more thoughtful in their interactions.

The struggle for EYPs who lack understanding of when to engage is reflected in Hopkins' (1988) study of work discussions described in the literature review. Hopkins reports that work discussions can support EYPs to deal with the complexities of relationships in which they find themselves, particularly those who work with children under the age of three. Elfer and Dearnley (2007) say that taking part in work discussions raises awareness of the emotional demands of Early Years practice. Elfer (2012) says that taking part in work discussions can reduce feelings of loneliness and the pressure to remain positive towards the emotional demands of the job.

This appears to echo findings in previous research work, that discussions can help EYPs to become more aware of individual children's needs, carry out more thoughtful observations, and become more able to deal with children's difficult emotions and increased interactions. Specifically, in relation to the current research, the EYPs feel more able to acknowledge their emotions and that interactions with the children are more thoughtful. This could perhaps be because the GI facilitates a group discussion in which the EYPs focus on their own levels of engagement.

Jackson (2002) reports that teachers question whether work discussions in which no teaching takes place are an effective way of working. In relation to the current research, the findings suggest that these are an effective way of working with EYPs.

The EYPs report that they feel shifts in their emotional engagement and have more meaningful interactions with their key children. This could be because the GI focuses on a collaborative approach rather than direct teaching, enabling those with the necessary pedagogical understanding to share their knowledge.

5.7: Observing critically

As I seek to answer questions about which aspects of the Group Intervention made the EYPs change their implicit beliefs and emotional engagement, and those which contributed to the subsequent changes in practice, a number of external processes come to the fore. These include observing critically, learning with and from others, and group work and collaboration. Certainly, the theme of changing emotional engagement illustrates some of the external processes that are found to be involved in the EYPs changing their implicit beliefs and emotional engagement with their work.

The most striking findings in this study are the changes found in the EYPs' observational practice. The study reveals many significant improvements consistent with the findings of Papatheodorou (2009). These include increases in knowledge, skills and understanding about the process of learning, instead of only observing the content. The EYPs appear to engage more with children they previously struggle with. Furthermore, the EYPs note improvements in the children's learning because of the Group Intervention.

In relation to the EYPs' own learning, they indicate that they have gained new knowledge and skills in observing development and learning; further confidence in observing learning through play; improved relationships with

the children; and valuing the pedagogical process. It is therefore possible that the process of group work and collaboration allows the EYPs to reflect on their observations on a more conscious level, making them more inclined to analyse them. The evidence suggests it cannot be supposed that EYPs who work with children know how to observe.

The evidence also suggests that participating in group interventions can close the gaps in the observational skills of EYPs, although it is difficult to prove conclusively that the Group Intervention had a direct impact on the EYPs' observations. The EYPs' increasing confidence in observing is key to the improvements in their practice and, in this study, the EYPs' confidence does increase. These findings strongly suggest that a group intervention may provide a way of combining the link between knowledge and practice through focusing on developing EYPs' confidence.

5.8: Becoming a team

The EYPs in this study identify a number of processes which they believe have brought about changes in the way they work together:

- The structure of the group meetings.
- Presenting and contributing at meetings.
- Collaborative approach to problem-solving

All the EYPs in this study describe how the group work activities enable them to understand each other better. This creates an atmosphere of trust

among group members, where they can be challenged by their peer group and know that these challenges are not personal. These findings are similar to the studies by Hanko (1999) and Soni (2014), which find that structured discussions enable participants to adopt a collaborative approach to problem-solving, reflect on practice, and develop teamwork.

The study finds that presenting to the group and contributing to subsequent group discussions enables the EYPs to feel a continual engagement in the process. The evidence suggests that the EYPs start to take ownership of their work choices, increasing responsibility for their actions. This point is related to Proctor's (2000) view that opening one's work up to others can lead to one becoming more accountable. Indeed, in this study there is also a sense that accountability goes beyond the individual's own role, to the collective actions of the team. This finding represents a new contribution to understanding the factors that may promote effective teamwork in Early Years settings.

The evidence suggests that the collaborative approach to problem-solving increases the EYPs' levels of engagement with their own learning, thereby transforming their perceived feelings of inadequacy into confidence. Other benefits to a collaborative approach include increased motivation and an understanding of how to learn and develop their skills. This finding is reflected in Hanko's (1987) assertion that group work helps to increase one's personal understanding and reduce professional isolation, as it ultimately provides a framework for reflection. Arguably, the Group Intervention reduces the EYPs' sense of isolation by giving them access to ideas from other people; it also helps to identify their own strengths and weaknesses. The

evidence suggests that there is a significant increase in their levels of emotional and social involvement with each other. There is a positive link between sharing common goals, knowledge and understanding, and developing relationships with each other. Indeed, their subsequent accounts describe their interdependence and their appreciation of each other's ideas and skills.

There is support for the claim that the EYPs' participation in the Group Intervention is a shared phenomenon – the process enables them to go beyond that of the individual meaning or interpretation, towards working as a team. This is an unintended consequence. The analysis establishes that it is through participation in the process that these EYPs become part of a team.

5.9: Group work and collaboration

The study finds a positive link between establishing trust and an increase in the EYPs using collaborative strategies to explore their observations. Other benefits include talking together more openly, and reflecting on aspects of their work they find challenging. This leads to an increase in confidence, so much so, that they provide help to others in matters relating to the Early Years Foundation Stage. This is an encouraging finding.

The study finds that the Group Intervention helped to increase interaction in the way the EYPs work together. The EYPs describe three ways in which the context of the group influences how supportive they become. Firstly, it allows them to reflect on their learning experiences, and the group members to gain insight into their thinking. This helps them to ask questions about their work in a supportive atmosphere. Secondly, it provides them with a support

structure in which they can ask for help from other group members. The support on offer includes pedagogical advice. Finally, by engaging in reflective conversations, the EYPs become more responsive to each other's needs, beliefs and interests, resulting in them becoming more able to help each other. This is in line with Vygotsky's (1978) notion that more capable people working together can have benefits for both the learner and the more knowledgeable. By working together, they can support each other to complete tasks.

Another study shows that collaborative learning is not so much based on seeking the right answers, but about developing thinking that can lead to significant improvements in understanding. For example, Hanko (1999) concludes that teachers critically reflect when they collaborate on problems, showing that collaboration leads to understanding. These factors are found to have a more significant impact on understanding than any other, including the EYPs' knowledge and skill set. The evidence suggests that the EYPs in this study are all comfortable working in the group because the discussions help them to think together. The fact that they continue to discuss issues outside of the Group Intervention also suggests that this way of working becomes established and that they value it.

Other benefits include being able to generate ideas, better general understanding, being able to ask for explanations, feeling involved and being encouraged. There is a consensus among the EYPs that the Group Intervention helped all of them to extend their skills and knowledge and confidence. The evidence suggests that group work in Early Years settings has clear benefits for EYPs.

The EYPs in this study also make particular reference to being guided, rather than being told what to do by the facilitator, as they are challenged to see their work through the eyes of their colleagues. In fact, the data indicates that the structure for organising the group meetings encourages them to collaborate. This, in turn, seems to influence an overturning of their previously-held beliefs and assumptions.

Also related to this issue is the extent to which EYPs are offered the scope to discuss and reflect on their work. This is an argument for more time and space for reflective group discussion. Without such provision, there is a danger that EYPs will become dependent on ticking boxes, limiting their focus on how children learn effectively through play.

It is significant that the findings of this research demonstrate that some of the challenges experienced by the EYPs were, in fact, due to the absence of opportunities for reflection and discussion about their assessment decisions. This is in line with Osgood (2006) and Stephen (2010), who assert that opportunities to exercise professional judgements, and engage in reflection and discussion about values which underpin practice, have been left out of the policy discourse.

Based on the evidence furnished within this study, I suggest that there is an urgent need for EYPs to take responsibility for their own professional development. One way they could do this is by working with each other. They may gain a better concept of what is expected of them and of the professional knowledge which needs to underpin their practice, thus embedding interpersonal learning into their Continuing Professional Development. This, in turn, may support the EYP to gain a better

understanding of the whole child and their developmental needs. Whilst the group discussions are a good way to develop professionally, it could be argued that if group interventions are done in conjunction with formal training, the professional development experienced may be even greater.

5.10: Learning with and from others

The EYPs in this study express a clear preference for finding things out together, rather than on their own. The data yielded by this study provides convincing evidence that the Group Intervention offered the EYPs a critical view of their practice. The involvement of others is crucial in shaping, not only their self-understanding, but also the nature of their interactions with each other.

The analysis in Chapter 4 reveals many expressive accounts from the EYPs about how it enabled them to consider and take on another's perspective. The evidence suggests that EYPs can adjust their behaviour in ways that reflect other people's perceptions. All the EYPs report that seeing their work through the eyes of their colleagues helps them to be more objective. Consequently, they feel that they have increased their knowledge of child development and they can apply this knowledge to their practice.

The work of Hawkins and Shohet (2006) may provide some further insight. Hawkins and Shohet suggest that group work involves processes of shared learning, reflection and contribution. Indeed, one of the positive benefits of sharing perspectives is that the ideas and understandings developed during discussions tend to be framed by meaningful learning experiences. This may explain why the EYPs in this study are more able to take responsibility for

their own learning. This idea is related to Wilson and Newton's (2006) research, which finds that gaining multiple perspectives provides more opportunities for understanding.

The evidence suggests that the EYPs' willingness to share their alternative views comes, in part, from their change of assumptions about their knowledge and from increased confidence in themselves. It is evident from their accounts that, whilst drawing on the perspectives of others, they simultaneously identify with the challenges and triumphs of those others and acknowledge the need to adjust their own expectations and approaches – a progression which is testament to changes taking place in their implicit beliefs and their ideas about emotional engagement. Based on this finding, the study indicates that the opportunity to have reflective conversations with each other encourages the EYPs to share good practice, challenge implicit beliefs and increase their understanding.

However, these discussions were not always comfortable and occasionally involved some emotional upset. I recognised that when the issues being discussed became too painful to deal with, anxiety could be avoided in a number of different ways, for example, keeping the group discussions general rather than specific, recognising the facilitator as unbiased yet critical, and maintaining a positive atmosphere.

Based on the evidence available it seems fair to suggest that this study enhanced the EYPs' self-understanding and minimised their feelings of inadequacy and failure. It is noteworthy that all the EYPs feel that discussing their work with each other profoundly affects their understanding of the children. They also note that they have learnt to appreciate the value of

sharing their views and opinions with others. This inherently helps them to move their practice away from being mere technicians to becoming professionals emotionally engaged with their work.

In many respects, this concurs with Moss and Urban (2011) and Urban's (2016) proposal that EYPs need to reclaim their professionalism and go beyond technical competence towards critical reflection if they are to transform their practice. The findings presented here arguably support this view, as the benefits of realising this optimum state of 'critical reflection' have been shown to be hugely significant.

Indeed, by their own admission, at the end of this study all the EYPs are better able to provide meaningful support for the children entrusted to their care than they were at the start, because the Group Intervention encouraged self-reflection about practice.

5.11: The significance of this study

The significance of this study is that it creates opportunities for EYPs to look closely at a sequence of observations, firstly to determine what it is that they are seeing and hearing that makes them take notice, then to consider their analysis and how they have gained insight into children's learning. By addressing changes in the self-understanding and self-awareness of its participants, this work builds on Hopkins' (1988) findings, in that it replicates her style of hosting group discussions in a nursery context. Unlike Hopkins' study, however, it amalgamates one group of EYPs from the same setting.

Along similar lines to Degotardi and Davis (2008) and Degotardi (2010), this study seeks to understand the interpretative process of the work carried out by EYPs. Using video footage, observational notes, personal knowledge of their children, and that of child development, it also aims to capture ways in which their perceptions about themselves and their work change – or not – through their participation in these group discussions. In addition to these previous studies, this piece of research concentrates on the actual effects and processes of self-understanding.

It should be noted that the connections between the EYPs' emotional experiences with children and the quality of their interactions are outside the scope of this study. Rather, it is entirely concerned with ways in which EYPs change their thinking and practices, although it is argued in Chapter 2 that thinking and practices are affected by emotions, which will be manifested in interactions and will qualitatively affect these interactions. It therefore has implications for how EYPs make sense of children's behaviour.

In this way, the research provides explanations about why practice has not moved forward as much as policy-makers may have hoped. Despite the input of more training than ever during the last decade – Birth to Three Matters (2003); Graduate Leadership Fund (2006); Parents as Partners in Early Learning (2007); Early Years Foundation Stage (2007); Social and Emotional Aspects of Development (2008); Letters and Sounds (2008); Every Child A Talker (2008); Two-Year-Old Training (2012) – I find many EYPs, particularly in the private sector, to be vulnerable, emotionally needy and inclined to become fixed on one particular method of implementing the OAP cycle.

Subsequently, this study highlights the case that unless EYPs are supported in addressing their self-confidence and improving their ability to reflect and learn, they are of little use to children. It argues that managers will need to recognise this shortcoming if they are to support EYPs who may be limiting children's learning.

5.12: Future research

This research study accomplishes the aims that it intended to. However, there are limits in this study and future work in this area may improve on these. Time is an important factor. The study was limited to ten months but it could be carried out over a longer period. This might be a more useful indicator of measuring the development of self-understanding.

This research examines four case studies and would have been strengthened with a larger sample size. Qualitative data collection means that it is hard to determine the precise effect that the Group Intervention had on the EYPs, regarding the way in which they continue to work. Despite the above criticisms, I propose that this study serves to expand this area of literature in a meaningful way.

This study builds on existing literature on group consultation CPD models in two ways. By describing, analysing and interpreting the group experience of the four EYPs, this study adds their voices to the literature. This addition is very important for the experiences of EYPs, as there is relatively little literature regarding their self-understanding. Secondly, the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach allows the EYPs to explain in their own words which factors contribute to their re-evaluation of their implicit beliefs,

change in emotional engagement and discovery of more effective ways to make their professional judgements.

This approach makes available the aspects of each of the EYPs' individual experiences, which increases understanding of how best to support them to develop pedagogical knowledge and practice. This understanding may then be utilised by nursery managers to inform policy and practice. However, I acknowledge that further additions and changes to its methodology could make it even more extensive.

5.13: Recommendations

Based on the results of this study discussed in this chapter, I make three recommendations to improve the access of EYPs to pedagogical knowledge:

- 1. There is a need to support EYPs to develop objectivity and their skills as an observer. Managers and supervisors should pay particular attention to this and should include all staff.**
- 2. While the current policy does not consider professional knowledge from a cultural and socio-political context, it may be advantageous to offer EYPs regular time and space for reflective group discussion, where they look closely at children's development and learning.**
- 3. To generate achievable policy and practice with regards to teaching the workforce better skills, there needs to be more understanding at a policy level to allow further consideration**

of how best to support EYPs to gain the required knowledge and understanding to do their job confidently.

5.14: Dissemination of this new knowledge

It is my intention to publish my work, writing articles in journals such as *Early Years: An International Journal of Research and Development*, *Nursery World* and *Early Education*. My purpose is to raise awareness of issues which are current and relevant to EYPs. I also intend to play a significant role in training group facilitators to run work-group discussions which place a strong focus on developing the confidence, knowledge and understanding of EYPs in ways which enhance their perception of child-initiated play.

5.15: Conclusion

This model of group work in Early Years settings provides four main benefits for EYPs. Firstly, as we have seen in this study, it can reduce anxieties associated with feeling threatened or fearful because of a lack of knowledge as to how to implement the EYFS. Secondly, it is helpful in facilitating the development of self-understanding, by addressing ways in which observations and assessments are constructed, understood and used in practice. The third point is the scope for reflection on one's values, attitudes and beliefs and, finally, it gives EYPs a much firmer foundation on which to develop their knowledge and skills.

The findings lend support to the claim that EYPs who lack confidence might be more inclined to endure feelings of failure and inadequacy, resulting

in them carrying out their observations and assessments in a purely mechanical manner. That being the case, there is a moral duty to facilitate continuing development for all staff working with the EYFS.

The primary indication is therefore that more emphasis should be placed upon how they evaluate each observation with a view to actively making the necessary changes to their practice. It is hoped that this more reflective approach to understanding child development will eventually lead to EYPs developing pedagogical knowledge, as well as critically reflecting upon the values and beliefs implicit in their practice.

Finally, I conclude that the Group Intervention is a powerful tool for allowing EYPs to engage in reflective dialogue in which they are encouraged to critically explore their self-understanding and their practice.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Observation, Assessment and Planning audit (OAPA)

Observation, assessment and planning	Emerging	Developing	Secure
	<p>Written records include some comments showing how individual children have coped with activities, or of the appropriateness of activities.</p> <p>Some of the written planning shows differentiation for particular individual children or groups.</p> <p>Practitioners sometimes meet to evaluate the provision and plan for the children.</p> <p>There is evidence that the practitioners sometimes match their provision to the interests of individual children.</p>	<p>Children are observed regularly in accordance with the assessment and planning system. Individual records are kept on their progress in different aspects of their development and learning.</p> <p>Day to day plans are drawn up with the specific aim of developing experiences that will meet the needs and interests of each child individually or as part of a group.</p> <p>Practitioners meet at least once a fortnight to review children's observations and plan for their next steps.</p> <p>There is a twice weekly informal reflection of how the provision has met the children's needs and interests. The provision is adapted in response to the children's interests.</p>	<p>Children's observations and records of progress are used to directly inform planning.</p> <p>Planning identifies the role of the adult when working with individuals/groups of children. Planning also shows a range of capability levels at which an activity may be experienced.</p> <p>Practitioners meet once a week to review children's observations and plan for their next steps.</p> <p>There is a daily informal reflection of how the provision has met the children's needs and interests and an immediate adaptation if required.</p>

Appendix B: Questionnaire

This will be audio recorded subject to the interviewee's consent

Title of Project: How might practitioners working in the early years take account of their own beliefs, values and interactions when making analytic judgements about children's learning?

Name of Researcher: Stella Louis

Participant Identification Number for this project:

1) Describe your experience of assessment?

2) Describe the methods you use when making professional judgements?

(3) Describe issues and concerns that you have about the assessment process?

Appendix C: Playing with what they know questionnaire

For each characteristic of effective learning please mark the box for Not observed, Sometimes, Mostly and Always. It would help me if you answered all characteristics as best as you can. Please give your answers based on your professional judgment of your key child's play and exploration over the last six weeks.

Characteristics of effective learning observed in play	Not observed	Sometimes observed	Mostly observed	Always observed
Shows curiosity about objects, events and people				
Uses senses to explore the world around them				
Engages in open-ended activity				
Shows a particular interest				
Pretends objects are things from their experience				
Represents their experiences in play				
Takes on a role in their play				
Acts out experiences with other people				
Initiates activities				
Seeks challenge				
Shows a 'can do' attitude				
Takes risks, engaging in new experiences, and learning by trial and error				
Maintains focus on their activity for a period of time				
Shows high levels of energy, fascination				
Not easily distracted				
Pays attention to details				
Persists with activity when challenges occur				
Shows a belief that more effort or a different approach will pay off				
Bounces back after difficulties				
Shows satisfaction in meeting their own goals				
Is proud of how they accomplished something – not just the end result				
Enjoys meeting challenges for their own sake rather than external rewards or praise				
Thinks of ideas				

Characteristics of effective learning observed in play	Not observed	Sometimes observed	Mostly observed	Always observed
Finding ways to solve problems				
Finding new ways to do things				
Making links and noticing patterns in their experience				
Makes predictions				
Tests out their ideas				
Developing ideas of grouping, sequences, cause and effect				
Planning, making decisions about how to approach a task, solve a problem and reach a goal				
Checks out how well their activities are going				
Changes strategy as needed				
Reviews how well the approach worked				

Adapted from Revised Early Years Foundation Stage 2012

Appendix D: Participant consent form



ETHICS BOARD

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM PRO FORMA

Title of Research Project: How Might Practitioners Working in the Early Years Take Account of their Own Beliefs, Values and Interactions, when Making Analytical Judgements about Children's Learning?

Brief Description of Research Project:

Participants will be invited to attend a two-day inset-training course on the Tavistock Method of Observations, Susan Isaacs's (1933) analytical frame and Lev Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal development (ZPD). It is intended that all staff working within the nursery setting will be involved; the research will commence in September 2012 – July 2013. Participants will be asked to present the observational data that they have gathered using the Tavistock methods of observations to analyse the child's progress either on their own or with a colleague present. The discussion group will take place on the second Wednesday of each month between 5-6 pm.

Stella Louis
EdD Programme
Roehampton University
Roehampton Lane,
SW15 5PJ
Email: sramlouis@aol.com
Telephone: 07944 961 579

Consent Statement:

1. I agree to take part in this research, and am aware that I am free to withdraw at any point, by contacting Stella Louis on 07944 961 579. I understand that the information I provide will be treated in confidence by the investigator and that my identity will be protected in the publication of any findings. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses.

Name

Signature

Date

Please note: if you have a concern about any aspect of your participation or any other queries please raise this with the investigator. However, if you would like to contact an independent party please contact the Head of Department (or if the researcher is a student you can also contact the Director of Studies.)

Director of Studies Contact Details:

Name: Professor Adam Ockelford
University Address Roehampton

Head of Department Contact Details:

Name: Dr Victoria Perselli
University Address Kingston

Roehampton Lane
SW15 5PJ

Email a.ockerford@roehampton.ac.uk
Telephone 0208 417 5272

Kingston, Surrey
KT2 7LB

Email v.perselli@kingston.ac.uk
Telephone 0208 417 5272

Appendix E: Parent consent form



ETHICS BOARD

PARENT CONSENT FORM PRO FORMA

Stella Louis
EdD Programme
Roehampton University
Roehampton Lane,
SW15 5PJ
Email: **sramlouis@aol.com**
Telephone: **07944 961 579**
August 2012

Dear Parent,

I am a research student at Roehampton University, currently studying on the Educational Doctorate Course. I will be carrying out a piece of small scale research and have chosen to explore how practitioners working in the Early Years take account of their own beliefs, values and interactions, when making assessment judgements about children's learning.

As part of my research I would like to facilitate discussion groups with the staff and am seeking your permission for your child's learning and development to be video-taped and discussed. All responses will be made anonymously and no names will be used when I write up my research. The research will commence in September 2012 –July 2013. Your child's key-worker will be asked to present the observational data that they have gathered and this will be discussed with myself who will lead the discussion along with video footage. The discussion group will take place on the last Thursday of each month between 6-7.pm.

I hereby give **Stella Louis** permission to use any still and/or moving image being video footage, photographs and/or frames and/or audio footage depicting my/our children.

This section is to be completed by parent / guardian:

I give permission for my son/daughter name:. -----to be video-taped and discussed as part of this small scale research study (*please delete as necessary*)

Signed:-----

Print Name:-----

Date:-----

Relationship to child:-----

Please note: if you have a concern about any aspect of your participation or any other queries please raise this with the investigator. However, if you would like to contact an independent party please contact the Head of Department (or as the researcher is a student you can also contact the Director of Studies.)

Director of Studies Contact Details:

Name: Dr Peter Elfer
University Address: Roehampton University
University
Roehampton Lane
London
SW15 5PJ
a.ockerford@roehampton.ac.uk
Email: p.elfer@roehampton.ac.uk
Telephone: 0208 392 3000

Head of Department Contact Details:

Name: Professor Adam Ockelford
University Address: Roehampton

Roehampton Lane,
SW15 5PJ

Email:

Telephone: 0208 417 5272

I do hope that you will feel able to assist me. I have enclosed a SAE for your reply, or alternatively you can contact me on the above telephone number.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Stella S Louis

Appendix F: Pen pictures of participants

Denise is a 49-year-old white British woman who, at the time of this study, had worked in the Early Childhood field for 14 years and had been at Fiddle Sticks nursery for 11 years. Before taking up her position at Fiddle Sticks, Denise had a number of roles in the missionary, nanny and secretarial field.

Denise is an experienced EYP. She holds an NVQ Level 3 Diploma in Childcare and Education and, in 2010, completed a one-year Special Education Needs Coordinator training course (SENCO). Denise currently works as a senior Early Years Practitioner and has overall responsibility for children with additional needs who attend Fiddle Sticks. In addition, Denise is the key person to 12 children aged between two and five years and has overall responsibility for their individual development and learning. Denise attended ten out of ten work Group Interventions in which she presented detailed observation reports to the group and fully participated in each phase of work group discussions.

Kate is a 45-year-old white British woman who, at the time of this study, had worked at Fiddle Sticks for four years. This was her first job since returning to work in 2009, after having raised her own four children.

Kate is a relatively inexperienced practitioner. She holds an NVQ Level 3 Diploma in Childcare and Education and has attended a one-day Observation and Assessment course. Currently, Kate has responsibility for 12 key children aged between two and five years. Kate attended nine out of ten work Group Interventions in which she presented detailed observation reports to the group and fully participated in each phase of work group discussions.

Julie is a 27-year-old white British woman who, at the time of this study, had worked at Fiddle Sticks for 18 months as an EYP. Before taking this position, she had worked in several different nurseries, from apprentice to EYP.

Julie is a relatively experienced practitioner and holds an NVQ Level 3 Diploma in Childcare and Education. She has also attended a one-day course on Observation and Assessment. She has responsibility for 12 key children. Julie attended seven out of ten work Group Interventions in which she presented detailed observation reports to the group and fully participated in each phase of work group discussions.

Erica is a 24-year-old white British woman who, at the time of this study, had worked at Fiddle Sticks for five years and five months. Before taking the position at Fiddle Sticks as a nursery practitioner, Erica worked in two other nurseries.

Apart from completing her NVQ Level 3 Diploma in Childcare and Education, Erica has not attended any further professional training. Erica has responsibility for 12 key children. She attended eight out of ten work Group Interventions in which she presented detailed observation reports to the group and fully participated in each phase of work group discussions.

Appendix G: Semi-structured interview questions

1. Could you tell me about your experience in Early Years?
2. What professional training have you undertaken?
3. What did you think about the process of reading through the observations and discussing them afterwards?
4. In what other ways do you think reading through the observations was beneficial?
5. How helpful or not was the method of looking and listening and noting down after the observation had taken place?
6. How useful was the process of reading through the observation and discussing it?
7. Is there anything you would like to tell me about the video footage?
8. How did sharing your presentations, with your colleagues, change your perception of what you had seen?
9. Could you describe how sharing your presentation with your colleagues changed or not your perception of what you had seen?
10. What was it like listening to your colleagues' perspectives on your key child?
11. What impact did the feedback from your colleagues have on your understanding about your key child?
12. What new information or not did group discussions reveal about your key child?
13. How will you use this in your day-to-day practice?
14. Could you describe how your practice has changed or not after having the group experience? In your own words.
15. What comments can you make about the structure of the group discussions?
16. What helped you to have a more constructive discussion?
17. How have you implemented the knowledge that you've gained from our group discussions?
18. Can you give any other examples of ways in which your practice has changed, after having had the group experience?

19. What did you find daunting, or difficult, about presenting your observations?
20. What helped you through?
21. Can you give me an example of any challenges that remain for you?

Appendix H: Exploratory Comments

BOX 1 REPRESENTS INITIAL EXPLORATORY COMMENTS

Increased confidence with observing, knowing what the children are doing	Mm, it is a great experience to be able to be with the children and actually watch them develop and learn. And how I... me as a role model to them and how I can achieve that to help them.
Getting to know own key children better	Ever since, I was 16. So, I am now 23, so about 7 years.
Communicating with others and reflecting on practice	I remember one of them; it was not really a big issue. It is just because I just did, as I said, I didn't feel like how is like... how, how, how can you watch this child and just think 'Oh look they are doing all... all of this in one thing? Oh he keeps doing this!' Going up and down with a truck and round in a circle. And actually from watching it, it has helped me just see the bigger picture.
A more mindful approach to observing – thinking about what the child is doing and why	Just confidence actually. Emotions of feeling happy to know about my children and delighted and to be able to put that into progress and to do something with them.
Development of a more child centred approach	Yeah, definitely! But it's been a big turning point, because we're all just so different now. We're all just fiery. When we had that lady come to visit, for you... we've, we've just... we've all done amazingly well and we just all... it's... it's benefited not just for me, because, I just, we were sitting there and the lady came and was asking us questions and how we feel and Joanna started it, and then I started it and then before you knew it we all just, it was new. It was all just coming off of us. So it's been an amazing, amazing course to be along with and part of.
Less directive, more hand on	Yeah, I think... I mean I was so different because it's given me a clearer insight of actually what I can see and, like, what I can do with them, and actually just observing them from... and, like, for example, not having to have a pen and paper there. Actually just watching what they are doing and how that is benefited.
Encouraging more independence and creative learning	Umph. Loads of it! It helped with my talking, with my staff. It has helped me better my observations. I, I, I have
Issues around motivation	
Developing observational skills	
More in tuned with key children	
Issues around sharing and reflecting as a	

<p>team – bringing them closer together</p> <p>Now more willing to gain insight from others and considering different views</p> <p>Issues related to development of practice</p> <p>Communicating with colleagues</p> <p>Participating in staff meetings</p> <p>Communicating with colleagues</p> <p>Issues relating to being less possessive about knowing her key children</p> <p>Considering different viewpoints – more cohesion and respect for each other</p> <p>Issues relating to staff development</p> <p>Increasing the opportunity of communicating with children even during mundane task</p>	<p>noticed my observations have come on leaps and bounds like from, from, from doing it, the course. It's actually helped me with activities, just to support them and like to do activities. Like today, this morning I done the creative table and I just done normal water paint with watercolours and then I thought: 'No, I'm not going to stop there I'm going to do something else.' And we did the play dough, and I got all the play dough out and all the cups out with the children. I was like: 'Come on then.' And the temp lady was like, 'Oh do we have to do this.' I was like 'No, just let them do it.' And I was just standing back, and even that normally I'd be like: 'No.' Like I'd be pretty hands on with them, but I just stood there was like, 'Ok, fill that cup up for me'. We were asking open-ended questions, and we had discussions about what they were doing. It, it was amazing... and actual... That, that is how I could see that I have changed a lot, because before I'd be like 'No! You have to put the cup properly and this...' So no amazing, just... I should elaborate a bit more, yeah it's just helped me with planning activities and just doing things, and actually being more hands on with the children. Oh, really great! It makes me feel like I know the job. [Laughs]. Because that is why I get up every morning, I get up to come and work with children. So I feel like my files have improved. Oh, massively! Like I feel more confident now. I feel like when I am working with children that actually I know who they are. So, it's actually given me a big massive confidence and to work better in a team, and that's what we're here to do other than be there for the children. Like, if you do not ever talk to your team staff you will not ever get anything. Definitely worthwhile because everyone's got an individual insight of their own child, so to all go through it together, nine times out of ten you are all going to get something different and you are going to have... when we did that observation last time, and we thought 'Oh she's just jumping, she just likes jumping'. But, it's interesting how</p>
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Valuing the facilitator in group discussion session – helping staff engage and share information

we all come together to actually see what we know about them and all have our parts put together to be to develop that, just a simple jumping activity.

Oh it's definitely benefited me. Just, as I said, to have all them groups... to have the group times and even like you come once a month but still even on staff meetings now, before they used to be quite boring and dull when everyone used to talk about random stuff and you are sitting there not even listening, you are not whatever just shhh. But now we're not like that. Since you have come we are so different, like we get the planning out and the planning is done, it's all discussed. Then it is like, 'Right. What did you notice of such and such and your key children?' Or someone, 'What did you notice?' And we're like, 'Oh, did you notice that they done that?' So we're still continuing that now even though you are not here when you come once a month, but it's been so worthwhile.

It makes me feel good. It makes me feel really good, because it's like you are not just one little pony sitting in a corner trying to do all this work on your own. It, it makes me feel excited because it like right I, I, I'll benefit from a staff meeting now, whereas before I just wanted to sit there and just go home. I'm like, 'Oh what is the point? I just want to sit about and talk about some random thing that someone's done last week.' So, no, it makes me feel much better now to sit in the staff meeting – be more positive about it.

Yeah, it has. It has changed my perception on stuff because, as I said, it is like I'm looking at them and I'm like actually, what are they getting out of this? What are they actually doing? But, it's like actually going back like either to Claire or again at the staff meeting and we're all just sitting there discussing it, it's like: 'Whoa'. Sometimes I am getting a more better insight than me, just myself, looking at it. We're discussing it also it has... yeah, definitely benefited.

At the beginning, I used to get really frustrated. Like I used to be like, 'You don't know my key children'. Like a little, a little bit defensive. 'That is not what

they are doing! How can you tell?' Now I am like no, bring it on. Let me know what you know, because I am seriously missing... I might be missing something out, but before I would not have been like that. I'd always be like if someone was saying something I'd be like... and then I'd beat myself up because I'd go, 'Oh, why did I not think of that?'... because they've said that and then I'd go, 'Oh I knew that.' But now I'm just like: 'Please just talk to me, let me know what my children are doing, because I can see some it, but actually I want you to tell me what you can see.' So it's helped me so much.

Yeah definitely, because sometimes I just cannot see certain things there. So with having an impact on me about my key children it's like if I'm doing a baseline matrix, for example, and I'm like right I haven't seen them do that and then they'll... say for example Kate will go, 'No, she did that in the garden.' And she'll go into full-depth like an example of what that child's just done for that, and I'm like: 'Oh, I did not see that.' So it, yeah definitely had a big impact on me.

Yeah, I do think it has changed. Like myself did you say, sorry?

Yeah, yeah, no, it has changed a lot because I just think my, my attitude towards it now is much more clearer. Like and I am just so much more positive about it. I am not just looking at children and thinking 'Oh God, I've got to change a nappy I've got to do this and potty training' even though I've got to do them – but, I'm always talking to them. Always talking to the children. Even potty training, I will sit on the floor reading them a story for ages while they are trying to have a wee. It, it has just changed my approach in the way that I work and it is like I don't want to be sitting back and just watching them. Actually, yeah it is vital that you watch them because sometimes you... if you are hands on too much, then they are not going to find their own feet, go off, observe on their own, and explore their own knowledge stuff. But, no it's just helped me a lot just to understand the children.

	<p>Ooh, at the beginning my first one I was just like, 'Oh my God this is going to be negative. Stella's going to say something and I don't know I'm going to like it and...' Actually, it done me the world of good, because like your knowledge and your input actually helped me and then it started off like a little bowling ball going round and round and round with all the other stuff. So, no it's, it's done really well.</p>
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Appendix I: Emergent themes - Denise

Original transcript	Emergent theme	Line number
<p>I did not think that we could get into that... get all that out of one little observation.</p> <p>I am just writing these observations. I will watch him. I will do this. [Huffs]. I do not know why he is doing it. He is just making a mess, he just wants to throw those bricks on the floor.</p> <p>Oh I'll do what I'm supposed to do and if she knows something more than me then that will be good.</p> <p>I am not watching her, what a waste of time.</p>	Technical approach	<p>151</p> <p>191</p> <p>195</p> <p>564</p>
<p>We didn't understand why she was doing it.</p> <p>I thought maybe I shouldn't be in childcare.</p> <p>I was thinking oh I got to catch him on the video, a two-year-old. She's being funny ain't she. I mean I'm being serious.</p>	Fear of failure	<p>66</p> <p>189</p> <p>365-366</p>

<p>I'm not doing the right thing for this boy, oh he needs so much help, I was looking at the negative.</p> <p>I think the attachment on my side was I'm not doing any good, I'm not doing any good. What am I going to do? What am I going to do?</p> <p>Cause I, I'm a bit of a problem I only write observations that I see.</p>		<p>463-464</p> <p>470-471</p> <p>554</p>
<p>I learnt that I had a bad attitude about children with two-year-olds.</p> <p>I think I was so caught up with 'I want to help this child, I can't do it', I really think I should rethink on what I am doing. Maybe I should... I am not in for child... I mean, I got to that point where I thought maybe I should not be in childcare.</p> <p>In the point I thought: 'I'm just writing these observations. I'll watch him. I'll do this. [Huffs]. I do not know why he is doing it. He is just making a mess, he just wants to throw those bricks on the floor'.</p> <p>I think the attachment on my side was I am not doing any good, I am not doing any good. What am I going to do? What am I going to do?</p>	<p>Lack of knowledge, skill and confidence</p>	<p>166-167</p> <p>187-189</p> <p>191-193</p> <p>470-471</p>
<p>Oh, this child is being really a pain in the neck.</p>	<p>Examining implicit beliefs</p>	<p>55-56</p>

<p>He was biting or bullying.</p> <p>I knew schemas, but I never thought of... how him building it up and knocking it down was his way of figuring things out.</p> <p>I realised he is not doing it to be a pain he is doing it for a reason that my attitude changed.</p> <p>I think my whole outlook of how you approach a two-year-old was... I think that was what come out of it for me. It wasn't him, it was me.</p> <p>I have forgotten, I had forgotten what two-year-olds are like and I just needed that prompting in myself.</p> <p>It made me realise that you can't... with a two-year-old you can't set 'em up to do stuff they just do it.</p> <p>It made me realise if you're, if you're consistent with them they will sit down and they will do what you want. Maybe not what you want.</p>		<p>79</p> <p>199-200</p> <p>201-202</p> <p>207-208</p> <p>351-352</p> <p>371-372</p> <p>386-387</p>
<p>I love sensory play. I love mess. I do like mess, but I with thought, you know, when like you want all your sticking bits together? It used to really irritate me, you know? They put</p>	<p>Changing emotional engagement</p>	<p>343-347</p>

<p>the sand in the... but know it's like 'Oh, they have to do it, you have to let them do it.' And when someone goes 'They're doing...' they have to do it, leave them, leave them.</p> <p>The minute, the minute I saw it, someone said 'You know, Dee, sign' or you know the advice that was given there you know, like you look at the positive side of things not the negative, but they probably didn't even realise at the time.</p> <p>I think it was my change in attitude, 'cause I am terrible. you know, I think too I changed how I felt.</p>		<p>473-475</p> <p>628-629</p>
<p>So I think the new revelation in that was that the girls come up more and share about him. Like, 'Did you see that? You should see what he's doing out in the garden now.'</p> <p>I think it's taught me too what, which we're doing in the planning, like when we do a week's observation on each child, we go and we summarise it and we plan the following week what we're going to do. And I think your, you coming in when you did, implemented or helped us implement, what we were going to do on the board. So, I think, erm... I think too 'cause I always worried about, oh you know, I needed a really long observation, which is really good which I do, but sometimes you just have those little snatch-its because you're really busy. And the little snatch-its and then you put 'em on the board, and then you summarise it all at the end of the week, you've got your long observation, which has got a wealth, a wealth of information.</p> <p>Then you put us in group... twos and we have this discussion and I think you bounce off of each other and then in the thingy you hear someone else saying what their bit and you think, 'Oh, did you hear what she just said?' And it's like really you want to get into the discussion, but it's good because you're all thinking. I think it is, I think it is the way we do it is good. I think it's good</p>	<p>Becoming a team</p>	<p>505-507</p> <p>542-551</p> <p>523-527</p>

<p>I think that one of the things that's happened in the group sessions with you is that we've become more of a team in the point we always were a team, but I think the discussion side of it is that we... I don't think, especially the younger ones, are not afraid to say what they think in the point of they know I going to be judged</p>		481-484
<p>Between us we did really find the answer. And we done it as... as like two or three... like two of us together, then two of us again or two over here, but I think one of the big lessons is girls don't do it individually, do it as a group. Erm, because you find out so much more, because we're all working in the same room that each one of us missing something out I think, I just needed somebody to say 'Do you know what he has just done? Do you know what he's just done?' The excitement in Stella made me think 'Oh yeah'. It was like a clock... I call it my learning journey.</p>		220-224
<p>I find it really helpful talking it over with each other, because you get all bits in and then you think 'Oh yeah, I saw that, and did you see this?' And it's like a bit of a gossip, you know what I mean?</p>		37-39
<p>I think it was the observations of others. I think also the discussions of what everybody's talking about. You know how this person brings one thing in and this person brings this on, and everybody muddles all together.</p>		67-69
<p>Your comments, I think. But you don't really tell us... we come to it. Or you... I suppose you do put a little bit in, but I think that... I think, myself, I feel that when you're not around when this is all over us as a group could possibly do it without you.</p>		129-131
<p>Helpful. Helpful. An insight into what they thought/think of him and I think in myself with him, they realised my own frustrations as well I think. That I think it was quite nice in the point of 'Yes, I deal with him on a daily basis' but then for them... well in group time and</p>		156-158

that, but to realise they've found him the same and had the same, erm, but they came back with the same things of 'Yes, he does need help in communicating'.		438-442
To realise, yeah, other people feel the same thing as me and we're all in this together.		447-448
It's made me realise each of us are individuals. Each of us has an importance to give and that each person is significant in my child's, I mean in my key worker child's, overall experience here, and why shouldn't they have a right to say what they think.		557-580
I suppose you understanding where he was coming from and the thing of, you know, you need to watch him, if you watch him you've got the answers there.		609-610

Appendix J: Emergent themes - Kate

Original transcript	Emerging theme	Line number
Whereas before we intervene and go: 'What you doing?' and stuff like that, and they usually go off then and then, you know.	Technical approach	20-21
<p>I am not very confident [laughs] in this sort of talking and putting myself across.</p> <p>It was quite daunting at first to talk about my work.</p> <p>I used to struggle with observations.</p> <p>I was quite shy, erm, but it's making... and I feel that I wasn't being heard.</p>	Fear of failure	<p>58-59</p> <p>119-120</p> <p>93</p> <p>193-194</p>
<p>I got a lot more out of just sitting back and watching him doing things and taking his time.</p> <p>I take things in different light now. I can see, I can understand 'Oh yeah, right' and schemas, and why they do it, and how they, how we can extend their play and move them on sort of thing.</p> <p>I am finding now I am writing more observations.</p> <p>I feel confident in, I can write them now.</p> <p>It's given me the confidence to write more observations.</p> <p>It has made me look at it differently and think differently.</p>	Examining implicit beliefs	<p>31-32</p> <p>60-63</p> <p>67</p> <p>68</p> <p>71-72</p> <p>75-76</p>

<p>Making it a bit more challenging for the older ones and a little bit more simpler for the younger ones.</p> <p>I find it easier now to write observations, just watching them, than going back and writing them.</p> <p>If you intervene too early it spoils it again but they will just get up and leave and disperse somewhere else.</p> <p>It is about them trusting and letting you come into their play.</p>		<p>77-78</p> <p>90</p> <p>167-168</p> <p>171-172</p>
<p>It has given me the encouragement and the confidence to speak out a bit more and my opinions do count.</p> <p>It is going with them – going with what they want to play and not always adult-led.</p> <p>I feel that I wasn't being heard.</p> <p>I am opening to talk about it, come out, and say 'Look, this is what I think, my opinions do count'.</p>	Changing emotional engagement	<p>152-153</p> <p>185-186</p> <p>194</p> <p>194-196</p>
<p>I am not worried about going to them now and asking questions.</p> <p>They advise me on how do I go about it.</p> <p>If they see things that I didn't they can go, 'Right well, did you know that he can do this'.</p>	Becoming a team	<p>124</p> <p>125-126</p> <p>140-141</p>

I am planning for activities more now, involving myself a lot more in... oh, like creative activities.		177-178
I learnt a lot through other people's opinions.		42
Observing the child and getting other people's opinions on that child and thinking, 'Oh, I did not think of it that way'.		46-48
Other people's opinions and the knowledge that comes out of it.		56
To get other people's points of view across.		98
The knowledge from what other people have given me and the feedback I have got, yeah it has helped me lots.		121-122
If they see things that I didn't and they can go right well, did you know that he can do this?		140-141
Everybody's input. It, it just opens up all these ideas and 'Ooh we can do this' and 'Ooh we can do that'.		99-100
It is nice to [have a] group discussion, and you feel like everybody... we, we all work together.		133-135
It's positive feedback and lots of input from them and, and, they can tell me things that I have obviously not seen, or he's spoken to them, or with any of my children speak. I think it was useful in respect of your seeing it, your experiencing what I have seen and you we, could discuss the points around the observation.		102-106

Just a big thank you for your erm, expertise and you have opened my eyes up to understanding children.		214-215
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Appendix K: Emergent themes - Julie

Original transcript	Emerging theme	Line number
<p>You do miss stuff when you are writing and you are trying to watch at the same time.</p> <p>Just by sitting back and watching. I am doing a lot more watching than I used to.</p> <p>Instead of just watching them play now, I feel like my brain is always ticking over trying to help them.</p>	Technical approach	<p>121-122</p> <p>140</p> <p>142</p>
<p>That sometimes my input does mean something even if saying it I do not think it at the time.</p>	Fear of failure	63-64
<p>I think we all tried to have a better understanding of what he is trying to tell you, give him more time, and the children are as well I think.</p>	Lack of knowledge, skill and confidence	51-52
<p>I'd say certain activities or body language that they're doing makes me think they're doing it for a reason.</p> <p>I think all my children will develop differently now I observe them differently.</p> <p>I think I saw a few children differently. I had my eyes wider to a wider picture.</p> <p>It has taken me to new levels of observing and knowing that child, and looking deeper into</p>	Examining implicit beliefs	<p>24-25</p> <p>136-137</p> <p>48</p> <p>20-21</p>

<p>what they do – taking more of an insight.</p> <p>I had a lot more detail.</p> <p>I felt like the observations were more in-depth and more meaningful.</p> <p>I am watching, I am thinking why they are doing that or how they could do it differently, instead of just watching I feel like my brain is always ticking over trying to help them or watching.</p> <p>I am constantly thinking, ‘Why is she doing that?’</p> <p>I think when you are observing your children you are a bit more in depth to get more out of it.</p> <p>I think it is a lot better than how it sitting there watching because you do miss stuff when you are writing and you are trying to watch them at the same time.</p>		<p>117-118</p> <p>120</p> <p>141-143</p> <p>174-175</p> <p>158</p> <p>121-122</p>
<p>I think we all tried to have a better understanding of what he’s trying to tell you, give him more time, and the children are as well I think.</p> <p>I feel a lot more confident and I feel I have more of a role with my children. I feel like I am a better key person than I was before.</p> <p>I feel like I’m meeting their needs more when it comes to activities, er, building relationships, meal times, bonding with parents.</p> <p>I feel like I am more professional. I feel like I am not just a nursery nurse that looks after</p>	<p>Changing emotional engagement</p>	<p>51-52</p> <p>100-101</p> <p>103-104</p> <p>197-199</p>

some children. Erm, I feel I have more of a meaning and that helping them to, to learn...		
<p>I think all of our discussions have helped all of us. Erm, when we're in the room we all talk as a group about a child and we all have a little input, and it kind of links all together.</p> <p>I think helping some of the other girls here, I feel like I've grown in confidence; if they ask me something I may be able to give them a better explanation for certain things if they want help with their children.</p> <p>But as a group we always have a good discussion.</p> <p>Everyone just comes together really when they're quite respectful of your opinions, and when you're talking they listen. And they're in the room most of the time and they're 'Oh I saw that. He was doing this or she was doing that'.</p> <p>I thought it was great 'cause it's, it's always just there to look at and you always notice something slightly different or somebody else will notice something that could help you.</p> <p>I will just gain more knowledge and help other staff or new staff, and if carry it on just throughout my childcare.</p> <p>I think helping some of the other girls here I feel I have grown in confidence; if they ask me something I may be able to give them a better explanation for certain things if they want help with their children.</p> <p>I think we just see different things.</p>	Becoming a team	<p>57-59</p> <p>78-80</p> <p>96</p> <p>128-130</p> <p>153-154</p> <p>192-194</p> <p>78-80</p> <p>171-172</p>

I think the discussions work quite well and at the end of them we are all really positive. We all chat, chat, chat. But sometimes we have to just shut up and listen.		185-186
Help other staff or new staff. Their explanation of what my key child has done today, what they have seen them do.		193 68
I think the evaluation at the end. I think you was very help... useful with reasons for why a child might be doing a certain action or their characters and it made us all think.		211-212
Everyone just comes together really when they are quite respectful of your opinions, and when you are talking, they listen.		128-129
You always notice something slightly different or somebody else will notice something that could help you.		153-154
We all just thought the same as we were working in the same room.		165
I think we are more aware now, we communicate a little better.		167
Can they just carry on? I would like to do them at least once a month 'cause we have gained a lot.		219-220
Can I say that your help? Your, your input starts us thinking and then we start talking, then we start as a group. I think it just builds up from there.		189-190
I think it was a great experience.		209

Appendix L: Emergent themes - Erica

Original transcript	Emerging theme	Line number
<p>You have to put it in the cup properly.</p> <p>Before with most of my key children, I used to just think 'Oh, they are not doing very much' or I am worried about why they are not covering this area and doing stuff like that.</p> <p>Before I would of made sure that they'd 'cover that glue up, you're going to get it all over the table.</p>	Technical approach	<p>72</p> <p>81-83</p> <p>131-132</p>
<p>Before I might start off and think I have not got a clue what this child's doing, I don't know why they are roaming, roaming the trucks.</p> <p>I used to get really frustrated. Like I used to be like, 'You don't know my key children'. Like a little, a little bit defensive</p> <p>I'd always be like, if someone was saying something, I'd be like... and then I'd beat myself up because I'd go, 'Oh, why did I not think of that?'... because they've said that and then I'd go, 'Oh I knew that.'</p> <p>That is not what they are doing! How can you tell?'</p>	Fear of failure	<p>104-105</p> <p>207-208</p> <p>112-114</p> <p>208</p>

Oh my God this is going to be negative. Stella is going to say something and I do not know I am not going to like it.		283-284
<p>How can you watch this child and just think 'Oh look, they are doing all... all of this in one thing? Oh, he keeps doing this! Going up and down with a truck and round in a circle.'</p> <p>What is he doing? And like when I looked at it, was like, I don't get it.</p>	Lack of knowledge, skill and confidence	<p>33-34</p> <p>229</p>
<p>It has given me a clear insight of actually what I can see.</p> <p>Like before, I would be pretty hands-on with them, but I just stood there, was like, 'Ok, fill that cup up for me'.</p> <p>It has changed my perception on stuff because, as I said, it is like I'm looking at them and I'm like actually, what are they getting out of this? What are they actually doing?</p> <p>My attitude towards it now is much more clearer. Like, and I am just so much more positive about it. I'm not just looking at children and thinking 'Oh God, I've got to change a nappy, I've got to do this and potty training'.</p> <p>I was so different because it's given me a clearer insight of actually what I can see and, like, what I can do with them, and actually just observing them. Not having to have a pen and paper there. Actually just watching what they are doing.</p> <p>It has helped me better my observations. I, I, I have noticed my observations have come on leaps and bounds like from, from, from doing it.</p>	Examining explicit beliefs	<p>51-52</p> <p>68-69</p> <p>184-185</p> <p>271-274</p> <p>51-54</p> <p>56-58</p>

<p>I feel more confident now. I feel like when I am working with children that actually I know who they are.</p> <p>Just sitting back and observing what they are doing as well as getting involved and being a role model to support them.</p>		<p>102-103</p> <p>266-267</p>
<p>It makes me feel like I know the job. [Laughs]. 'Cause that is why I get up every morning, I get up to come and work with children.</p> <p>I am not worried about why they are not covering this area.</p> <p>So it's, it has made me, a nursery practitioner much more... my job is more worthwhile.</p>	Changing emotional engagement	<p>77-78</p> <p>82-83</p> <p>136-137</p>
<p>We all have our insight and we all have our say of what we know.</p> <p>We all come together now. Like every now and again I have gone 'Oh, I have just done this report can you help?'.</p> <p>We are still continuing to meet once a month even though you are not here.</p>	Becoming a team	<p>28-29</p> <p>109</p> <p>156-157</p>

Appendix M: Clustered sub-themes for superordinate theme A

Perceived Sense of Inadequacy

Technical approach to work *Line number*

Denise: I am just writing these observations.....	190-191
Kate: Whereas before we would intervene.....	20
Julie: I am doing a lot more watching than I used to.....	140
Erica: We would make sure that they would cover that glue up.....	131

Fear of failure

Denise: I just felt like I was failing.....	202
Kate: It was quite daunting at first to talk about my work.....	119
Julie: Sometimes my input does mean something.....	63
Erica: You do not know my children.....	207-208

Lack of knowledge, skill and confidence

Denise: I am not doing any good.....	470
Kate: I did not know how to plan for the next steps.....	141
Julie: I think we all tried to have a better understanding.....	51
Erica: How can you watch this child and just think they are doing all of this, is this one thing	32-33

Appendix N: Clustered subthemes for superordinate theme Re-evaluating Assumptions

<i>Examining implicit belief</i>	<i>Line number</i>
Denise: It wasn't him, it was me.....	208
Kate: I am getting better all the time.....	204
Julie: Now I observe them differently.....	137
Erica: I don't want to be just sitting back watching them.....	277-278
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Appendix O: Data analysis - Denise

When the research started, Denise was a 49-year-old woman who had been working at Fiddle Sticks for 11 years. She indicates that she was 'pushed' into her career shortly after the death of her father. She recalls how working with the children had helped her to work through her grief. Denise has completed an NVQ Level 3 course in Childcare and Education. She is an experienced Early Years Practitioner (EYP) and was the second participant to present her observations to the group.

Fear of failure

At the beginning of the interview, Denise expresses her reluctance about engaging in the Group Intervention when it first started. She indicates feeling a sense of failure about a child that she was working with. She is explicit in pointing out that she had reached a sticking point and this had contributed to her somewhat negative view of the child.

However, as Denise makes clear, she needed someone else to tell her about her practice. Denise's response is particularly noteworthy, because it suggests that the Group Intervention gave her permission to seek support that she knew she needed to improve her practice. However, it is clear that the Group Intervention helped her to learn from her experience and become more compassionate towards the child. Moreover, her excitement of having the facilitator leading the discussions and pointing out what the child was doing well appears to help her to see the child differently. In her account, she

represents what she thought about two-year-olds at that point, as the following extract illustrates:

I was very reluctant; I can say that... I think I was going through... no, not going through. I have learnt so much it is very hard to put into words. I was very upset because I felt I was failing the little boy I was going to present. I needed encouragement. I had this big barrier in my head: two year olds – all they do is make a mess and you have to change nappies, and I thought of all the negative sides of it. And... I think, I just needed somebody to say 'Do you know what he has just done? Do you know what he's just done?' The excitement in Stella made me think 'Oh yeah'. It was like a clock... I call it my learning journey. Myself I learnt. It is like a journey of a discovery, the pair of us, me and this little boy... It is like a journey of a discovery.

Lack of knowledge, skills and confidence

In analysing Denise's position, she seems to believe that her effectiveness as an EYP is compromised by a lack of support. She attributes her difficulties with her job to her negative perception and to having too many key children. Her recollections of her work in the preceding extract highlight her sense of being stuck before the Group Intervention.

Denise's description seems to convey feelings of being overwhelmed and isolated. The impact that this has on her self-efficacy reflects a source of the feeling of not knowing what to do, inherent to questioning of competency. She emphasises her desire to help the child but at the same time wants to escape from the job. However, she comes to realise the extent to which she had misinterpreted the child's behaviour, and feels sorry for him. In the following passage, she points to projecting her own perceived inadequacies as well as descriptions of feeling burnt out:

I think that he was learning. It weren't him, it was me. Erm, I think I

was so caught up with 'I want to help this child, I can't do it', I really think I should rethink on what I am doing. Maybe I should... I am not in for child... I mean, I got to that point where I thought maybe I should not be in childcare. And I think the discussion was... an eye opener to me. In the point I thought: 'I'm just writing these observations. I'll watch him. I'll do this. [Huffs]. I do not know why he is doing it. He is just making a mess, he just wants to throw those bricks on the floor'. But that was the attitude had got to the point of and to write them: 'Oh, she will not know what he is doing anyway. Don't know why I'm...' You know like I was really...not that an attitude, but it was like 'Oh I'll do what I'm supposed to do and if she knows something more than me then that will be good'. And it was not that I was not doing... I was doing it sort of, like 'Oh I don't know if anybody knows' do you know what I mean? And I think with me it was me that changed because you opened my eyes. I knew schemas, but I never thought of... how him building it up and knocking it down was his way of figuring things out. And he is an... he would have to repeat things, he would does to repeat things. Erm, and I think too because I realised he is not doing it to be a pain he is doing it for a reason that my attitude changed.

It seems likely that Denise is projecting her own feelings of failure towards the child – she feels that she is failing and perhaps her lack of training in working with young children disempowered her, causing her to freeze and feel stuck, because she does not know that they may be playing. For example, when the child is discussed, this causes her to think about the emotions the child evoked for her. The ideas generated in the Group Intervention empower her to increase her awareness and appreciation of the child. Consequently, she becomes more willing to be part of the Group Intervention and acutely aware of what she does not know.

Later in the interview, Denise returns to the theme that her own perceived inadequacies might have been an inherent factor which acted as a barrier preventing her from facilitating learning and developing a relationship with the child. Through her discussions with others, she realises that she is focusing on the negative aspects of the child's behaviour and this is affecting

her ability to be an effective key person. In the following passage Denise describes how the Group Intervention helps her to change her perception:

I think the attachment on my side was I am not doing any good, I am not doing any good. What am I going to do? What am I going to do? Where really I should of looked at the positive sides. The positive side was he was happy. He was contented and he was just a little bit frustrated. And the minute, the minute I saw it, someone said 'You know, Dee, sign' or you know the advice that was given there you know like you look at the positive side of things not the negative, but they probably didn't even realise at the time. I mean they knew I was upset, because everybody knew I was upset at the presentation, but I think it was to realise, yeah, other people feel the same thing as me and we're all in this together. It's not just all right, he's your key worker child and you feel the responsibility, you have to do his paperwork, but hey, you know we know that too. You see what I mean? I think that... I think that one of the things that's happened in the group sessions with you is that we've become more of a team in the point we always were a team, but I think the discussion side of it is that we... I don't think, especially the younger ones, are not afraid to say what they think in the point of they know I going to be judged what I say, it doesn't really matter, so let me say what I think.

It is clear from Denise's response in the interview that the change in her self-understanding occurs very quickly after the Group Intervention and she is very aware of it taking place. More importantly, she reports gaining a better understanding of herself and being less negative in her interactions with the child. She identifies and builds on her understanding and this helps Denise to gain confidence, feel less like a failure, reduce her sense of isolation and encourages her to take more control of her relationship with the child. Thus, the Group Intervention gave her an opportunity to hear different opinions about the same observation without judgement, which had contributed to her feeling as if they were now a team. It also gave her the opportunity to reflect on her work.

Examining implicit beliefs

Denise explicitly makes seven references to the 'terrible twos' and stereotypical characteristics of their behaviour. During the Group Intervention, it is likely that the positive perceptions of her colleagues helped her to realise that two-year-olds are not as bad as she had originally assumed. It is interesting to note that she got the notion of the terrible twos from wider society, rather than any training. As the extract below illustrates, Denise is learning to understand and appreciate the complexities of being two.

I learnt that I had a bad attitude about children with two-year-olds. Terrible, terrible twos I call them. I am going to the terrific twos course tomorrow. Well, the terrible twos. I still call them terrible. I think that you should not judge things on... No, hold you. You should not judge things. You see something you think 'Ooooooh two-year-old'. What you should do is look, observe, and see why they are doing it. I think that is the big key for me. Why? Why did that child do that? Why did they? How can I bring that child on?

It seems most likely that Denise's negative attitude towards two-year-olds was brought about by her own deep anxiety, and lack of understanding of them. Thus, the Group Intervention allows her to become more reflective. This comes from reduced anxiety, which was based on the sense of being inadequate, perhaps also because of lack of professional development opportunities. The Group Intervention enabled her to increase her self-understanding and help her to examine, shift and alter her assumptions. The impact this has on her practice results in an increased sense of confidence and capacity to respond more sensitively, particularly in the way she listens to and observes children. She becomes acutely aware of her negative attitude towards children and her interactions with them significantly improve following the Group Intervention.

Denise had considered two-year-olds from a popular culture perspective rather than education or training. She recognises that many of her assumptions about how young children play and learn were flawed. The more she stood back to observe the child, the more aware she became of her misconceptions. Nevertheless, she realises that not reflecting on her practice had an impact on her effectiveness. In the following extracts, she describes her understanding of the developmental stages and attaches an educational perspective on this stage:

I have realised that whatever they do is for a reason. You know? It is not, I mean, what is the word? It is not that they, I mean... like the other day two two-year-olds were at the brick table. I mean to be honest, Malcolm building a tower was quite good in what he was doing. Well, these boys just went 'Boooom!' Every brick was all on the floor and I walked in and Claire says...She was showing this lady around and she went, 'Denise what do you think?' And I went, 'Oohh, who was that? What lovely two-year-old did that?' And the mum laughed and I said, 'Oohh, you both had fun, mmmmm'. And the mum goes, 'But it's all on the floor?' And I said, 'That's what they need to do'. And Claire went, 'You have changed'. [Laughs].

I used to hate it when the children had to pour the sand in together and then mix everything, I'd always thought of sensory play, because I love sensory play. I love mess. I do like mess, but I thought, you know, when like you want all your sticking bits together? It used to really irritate me, you know. They put the sand in the water... but now it is like 'Oh they have to do it, you have to let them do it'. And when someone goes 'They are doing...' I say they have to do it, leave them, leave them.

Important themes emerge throughout the interview with Denise. Probably the most overriding of these concern development of her self-understanding about how young children play, and help in development of a more objective perspective. These help her to participate with her observations more effectively and her understanding starts to increase significantly. After the Group Intervention, Denise begins to monitor and manage her own emotional

responses – she is less likely to become frustrated or rush to interrupt the child's play. It also gives her an understanding of how to work with young children, which reduces her worries about her lack of training.

In analysing her position, there is a clear shift in Denise's sense of self. This is reflected in how she begins to use the knowledge of theory to help her to look at the child in another way. Consequently, she starts to value their play differently. Denise now feels a new sense of joy and pride in her work. She discusses her work without feeling overwhelmed, because it now has new meaning. It is clear from her responses she is now more aware and beginning to notice the reasons behind why the child is doing some things:

I think I had always thought of schemas, but never... I always thought, you know when I write observations; I always thought 'Oh, that's a schema'. Erm... but I think now my whole outlook of writing observations is look 'Oh, that is a schema... how could I make them be enabled to do it more? Or how can... is that a schema? Or what is he doing?' Not thinking in 'Oh, this child is being really a pain in the neck', but more 'They must have a reason why they want to do that'.

Denise's account indicates potentially important changes in self-understanding. Her focus shifts from feeling stuck to one where she becomes more aware of her choices. For example, she starts to perceive children differently – she stops underestimating them and begins to question some of her values. Thus, the Group Intervention provided her with the opportunity to develop the understanding she needed to progress. This increases her confidence and her sense of self. She also becomes much more motivated about her work and more aware of her responses.

Denise seems to be searching for meaning from her observations in her attempt to further develop herself. She particularly highlights that her observations are 'deeper and more obscure', which suggests that the Group

Intervention was effective in helping her to think more objectively and change her behaviour – which also helps to reduce anxiety about her lack of training. What clearly emerges from the data is the way that Denise starts to see little things that would have gone unnoticed before the Group Intervention. In the following passage, she describes how she becomes considerably more supportive of the children's thinking in their self-initiated play:

I think it's, as I said, it's a learning journey... as I watch any of the children now I don't go 'Oh, this child is being a pain in the neck'... I watch and I wait and I've got the iPad, and I take pictures. Then I carry on watching and I take pictures. And I find now that my observations are more deeper and more... erm... more obscure sometimes in the ones that would not, if you did not see it and wait, you would not have got. You can like 'Oh look they are playing with the erm... the castle'. And you just sit there and they go 'do do do' and the conversation that comes out is unbelievable.

Denise realises that she had been jumping to conclusions, which adversely affected her understanding. She begins to use her observations to identify the facts and to back up her thoughts. That realisation changes her understanding, as she stops jumping to conclusions about children's play and starts instead to think more deeply about the evidence. The Group Intervention gives her an opportunity to be more aware of her own thinking. Most importantly, it changes Denise's understanding of herself regarding what the child needs from her. She begins to realise that the support that she had provided before the Group Intervention was not enough. Through discussing her observations in the group, she starts to appreciate how communication may vary. In this extract, Denise describes how she begins to notice play between children and how she contemplates supporting it.

That one made me realise that he needed more... I mean the child he was playing with was really helpful and really kind and he's kind

and... it made him want to go back and play with him, because he was so gentle with him and he... I encouraged the other child to say words to him and it made me realise that he needed, erm, what's that... modelling and that maybe I should do that.

Denise begins to broaden her understanding during the Group Intervention, drawing more on her own reflections and how others interpret the child's communication behaviour, to help her with making assessments. She starts to integrate their knowledge of the child with her own, which helps her to stop underestimating the child's abilities.

Interestingly, she reveals that soon after her presentation to the group she reassessed the child and found that he had gone up a whole developmental phase in his communication. In the passage below she describes how her assessments expand her perspective on the child's communication development:

I did a matrix before we did... Or it might have been soon after we did the presentation and he is gone up a whole level. So, he was 8-20 and now 16-25 in language and all right physical, he has always been on par but you know, just the whole aura of him, he is completely changed. It is so exciting to see.

Becoming a team

The Group Intervention and the observations of others help Denise notice the small changes in the child's communication and his progress. This has an impact on her professional practice, as she feels more equipped to identify a range of responses that she would expect to see when assessing a child's communication behaviour.

Again, Denise points to the degree in which the Group Intervention helped

her to challenge and change herself – once she knows which child is being discussed, she can picture them in her mind, question others openly and thus get answers. Recalling details vividly with others becomes central to her practice, so Denise's sense is that she feels 'better prepared' to deal with the challenges, if and when they arise. In the two quotes below, Denise describes how she starts to 'wise up'.

It made me think what I had seen prompted my memory. And two, you can see it. You know? You know you can visualise it, especially as it was the week before you can visualise what has gone on. So, yeah... I think it helped, especially if you were going to ask questions. I mean, I... I suppose you do feel that you're going to be asked questions about that child and yeah, I think it was... You would need to read yourself, you know? Yeah. It prompted my memory, and I think you need this because you are going to be discussing something that has happened a while ago. So, it makes me feel better prepared – once I'm asked questions about that particular child, I can visualise what's being discussed because I've just refreshed my memory.

I like the way you read the observation and then you leave it open and say 'What do you think?', 'cause most of us know we have to wise up a bit 'cause you go, [before the intervention] 'What is the observation you are doing?' Or they have come and asked, 'Oh do you think that sounds all right?'

The Group Intervention helps her to become more aware and informed about her work. She begins to develop skills in analysing her own and her colleagues' perceptions. She also begins to move towards an approach where her thoughts about her work start to inform her practice.

Summary

What clearly emerges from the data is the way in which Denise is now able to give positive and productive responses to actions which have made her

uncomfortable in the past. She understands the impact that she has on the children, colleagues and parents. Moreover, changes in her emotional and practical response to two-year-olds have a significant impact on her self-understanding. Trust and confidence in two-year-olds is now an important and empowering construct for her. Denise has put her finger on the extent of learning, as well as development, which happens in a short time span. She discusses her increased capacity to reflect and think analytically and points to how this had allowed her to learn from her experiences and discussion. Denise's perception of herself is further symbolised by her practical application of that learning when she is with children and 'teaching' other adults by example.

Appendix P: Data analysis - Kate

When the research started, Kate was a 45-year-old woman. She started work in the Early Childhood field after having stayed at home for 28 years to raise her own four children. Kate works at Fiddle Sticks nursery as an Early Years Practitioner and is relatively inexperienced. She has been working there for four years and had just completed her NVQ Level 3 at the time of the study.

Technical approach

This theme addresses those times that Kate talks about the need for a balance between adult-led activities and child-initiated approaches to play. It focuses on the adults' understanding of the deeper meaning of what the child already knows and wants to explore.

Throughout Kate's account, there are consistent themes around the perceived advantages of not intervening in the child's play. When she reflects upon the extent to which she had tried to lead and structure the child's play, she becomes aware that they were not engaging; instead, they were abandoning their play. She realises that this was a consequence of her interference and she resists the temptation to bombard them with inappropriate questions while they play.

Following the Group Intervention, she changes her approach. Instead of intervening, she begins to observe, which suggests a change in her understanding about valuing play and supporting learning. It is most likely

that it helped her to understand how to support the child's play and her role in assisting and extending it, which increased her confidence in her ability to do her job more effectively. In the following passage, she describes how she has moved away from intervening, how she has started to observe, and waits to be invited into the child:

Well, as I said more observations and not to intervene, let them take their play to a new level, you know what I mean? Not to spoil it by asking questions but at the same time, learning from them. Like I said before, if you intervene too early it spoils it for them but they'll just get up and leave and disperse somewhere else. Whereas, if you are there and they sometimes bring you into the play – bring you into their little world and their little, little, whatever their activity is and their asking you to, the questions, or instead of me going 'oh what you doing?' or 'what you not doing?' sort of thing. So, yeah it is about them trusting and letting you come into their play.

In analysing Kate's description of her work, she seems to be doing what she believes she needs to do, which is to provide adult-led activities. However, rather than initiating play, there is a clear sense that before the Group Intervention she had controlled it. In this extract, Kate describes a heightened awareness of observing and interacting with the children. She also implies that she is learning from them. The Group Intervention allowed her to acquire and develop her observational skills through examining her own practice. This is particularly important because, before the Group Intervention, she did not understand what she was doing.

Well, as I said more and more observations and not to intervene, let them take their play to a new level, if you know what I mean? Not to spoil it by going: 'Oh [what are you doing]'. But, at the same time, learning from them. It, it is just watching and learning from them.

[Pause]. Mmmmm. Again, it is as I said, it is just encouragement and confidence and stuff for me. It has helped me... to note things and to plan for the children really. It is just the same sort of...

Lack of knowledge, skills and confidence

It is clear from Kate's account that she regards herself as shy and lacking in confidence – the prospect of speaking to others in a group was probably quite frightening for her. When she reflects on the beliefs that she held about herself, she becomes more aware that they were limiting her understanding and she decides to reject them. However, as Kate herself points out, she had underestimated her own abilities and this had the greatest impact on her self-understanding. The Group Intervention helped her to accept and understand how her own perceived inadequacies may have affected her perception about her ability to communicate effectively, which increased her confidence in herself.

The emphasis of self and the increase in confidence is apparent. Kate clearly perceives the additional knowledge this will bring as being a central element in emphasising her sense of self. She is making a choice to understand her perceived inadequacies. Seeing herself as working with others is a significant construct in her self-understanding. In the following passages, Kate describes how she overcomes her anxieties about speaking at the group.

It is a confidence thing for me. So, yes, it was quite daunting at first to talk about it, but once you get into talking about it, it's, it's not as hard as you think some... yeah. Besides, the knowledge from what other people have given me and the feedback I've got, yeah, it's helped me lots.

Standing up in front of people talking, even though they are my close colleagues, it's still a bit daunting, standing, saying, have I produced good enough work if you like. Is this going to, oooh you know. It, it just... I do not know. It is that sense of achievement I suppose – that I have done it; I can do it. I am just like everybody else really, it is just I am just shy.

Kate explains her difficulty in writing observations, which had left her deeply frustrated. She received help from the Group Intervention, which allowed her to understand what she needed to record, and she becomes aware of the extent to which her perceived inadequacies were undermining her ability to do her observations more effectively. The Group Intervention had an undeniable influence on Kate's increase in confidence and this affects her performance in writing observations. In the extract below, Kate states that she now simplifies her observations.

I used to struggle with observations. I used to try to write observations... long, long, long list of what I want to write and I need not, I can simplify. Now I can, I know how to simplify if you like.

This suggests that part of the reason why Kate felt frustrated by the process of writing her observations was her lack of skill as an observer. Before the Group Intervention, she did not know how to write careful observations, nor did she know that the child might do things that he or she needs as part of their learning – her lack of understanding disempowered her. Not only is it a personal triumph for her, but it also enhances her observational skills.

Most importantly, when Kate reflects upon the degree to which her observations have improved, she realises that she is growing in confidence and abilities as an observer. Thus, the Group Intervention deeply affected her understanding of her own capabilities and she gained understanding about how limiting beliefs about herself affected her work.

I am finding now I am writing more observations, whereas before I will hold back and sit there and cross them out. Now I, I feel confident in, I can write them and now yeah that sounds OK and, and now we have been doing two of our key children a week and putting them on there.

So a lot more has been added into it, whereas before I held back a little bit, but now yeah... So yeah, it has given me the confidence to write more observations. [Laughs].

Examining implicit beliefs

Operating from a position of confidence, Kate begins to behave very differently and she provides an example of how she becomes more engaged in her work. She indicates that increasing personal involvement in the planning process allows her to look for new ways to develop her skills and learn new ones. She starts to reveal aspects of herself to others and talks about her interest more. It seems that the Group Intervention helped Kate to become more aware of her thoughts and behaviour, challenging her to do her job more effectively. This knowledge helps her to reflect upon herself and seek out meaningful opportunities to further develop her understanding.

In the extract below Kate describes how she does more planning, including with children, and balances child and adult-led tasks:

I am planning for activities more now, involving myself a lot more in... oh, like creative activities. I like to do creative activities. And involving, and asking the children their plans for what they would like, or what they would do and, so it is going with the children; not just adult-led all the time. And 'What should we do with that?' For instance, we had a box of shredded paper. It was on the activity and the other day the children just wanted to throw it at each other, so that is what we done. We had a great time just throwing it at it each other and, it was lovely. You know. They are laughing, joking, and running around with paper everywhere. So yeah, it is going with them – going with what they want to play and not always adult-led.

Kate's response is noteworthy because it suggests that she has a clear sense of purpose in her interactions and that she values the knowledge which the others contribute. Kate recalls how she began to relish the

challenge of interacting with others, causing her to move away from her comfort zone. When she realises that she has the confidence to speak out, and have her opinions valued, her lack of confidence no longer seems to be an issue. The Group Intervention allows her to openly reflect and analyse, then consider multiple perspectives.

It is just a learning curve for me. You see, it has helped me a lot. It really has, that is all I can really say it has. It has given me the encouragement and the confidence to speak out a bit more and my opinions do count. [Laughs]. Whereas before I thought they, you know.

In this extract, Kate expresses how the Group Intervention has helped her to develop her theoretical working knowledge and how she applies what she has learnt to her work. She becomes more aware of what is happening for the child from the child's perspective. Therefore, the Group Intervention allowed her to deepen her understanding of children's development, namely why children do the things that they do.

It has helped me immensely in the fact that it's ...I take things in different light now. I can see, I can understand 'Oh yeah right' and schemas, and why they do it, and how they do it, how we can extend their play and move them on sort of thing. So yeah, it has helped me a hell of a lot.

What clearly emerges from the interview is how Kate feels that she has gained a deeper understanding about what she needs to do next for the child and how she can do it. She discusses talking to her colleagues about child development and learning, how her interactions make her more aware of the child's thinking, and what is happening for them in the context of their particular interests. Moreover, she appreciates the extent to which a

considerable part of her work as an EYP involves talking to her colleagues, observing the child, and thinking about how to support and extend their learning.

Therefore, the Group Intervention allowed Kate to gain understanding about what the child knows and can do, and their approach to learning. It also helped her to recognise the progress that the children make.

[Pause]. Just to look at the child and the whole aspect of it, the whole aspect of the talking about what we have seen, how we are going to move them on and with everybody's input. It just opens up all these ideas, 'ooh we can do this', and 'Ooh we can do that'. It just makes it more exciting. We can move it on and put new challenges in for them, so yeah I find it a lot helpful.

Becoming a team

This theme highlights the benefits of Kate hearing from multiple perspectives about the child, as well as understanding more about play. It also relates to how she starts to allow open communication to take place with her colleagues. Kate explains that before the Group Intervention she tended to hold back from interacting with others because she was shy. When she reflects upon on her own communication behaviour, she becomes more aware of how much she has learned from others.

This leads to her asking herself important questions about her perceived fears of talking to the group. The Group Intervention allowed her to release her doubts and concerns and to open herself up. It also helped her to feel more confident to speak up and learn. It is clear that the more she applies the perspective of others to her work, the more she gains in her understanding about the child, which leads to an increase in confidence. It is

interesting to note that once Kate presents her work to the group and experiences the group's reaction to her insights, she is more able to engage with them.

In the following extracts, she describes her anxieties and how she overcomes reluctance to interact with others:

Whereas before I was not, I was quite shy, but it's making... and I feel that I wasn't being heard or I wasn't... but that's my insecurities I suppose coming out, but now, like I said, I can... I am opening to talk about it, come out, and say look this is what I think, my opinions do count, and that is it really, just things like that.

I am not worried about going to them now and asking questions, whereas before I would not, I would just sit back, but now I go right bub-a-bub. And they go right OK and they advise me on how do I go about it. So it's yeah, a lot of a confidence thing for me. Yeah, it helped me in that way.

Summary

A key feature which emerges clearly from the data is the way in which Kate increases her confidence and the impact that this has on her understanding. She discusses an increase in confidence in writing observations and in her role as an observer, and how this enables her to accomplish various Observation, Assessment and Planning tasks. She considers what the child wants to do and sets up appropriate boundaries for herself, to prevent herself from intervening, but allowing her to follow the children's lead. Kate feels that her lack of confidence was apparent, which made her less confident in the Group Intervention. Kate's perception of others responding negatively to her insights is represented by her account of being able to speak out and have her opinions valued. Kate's desire to be positive about the Group Intervention and her experience of it is clear.

Appendix Q: Data analysis - Julie

When the research started, Julie was a 27-year-old woman. At 16, she became an apprentice in the Early Childhood field, where she learned about child development. Once she had completed her apprenticeship, she began on-the-job training in which she gained an NVQ Level 3 Diploma in Childcare and Education. Julie is an experienced Early Years Practitioner who has held a number of positions in early years, including being a room leader. She now works at Fiddle Sticks nursery as an EYP. At the time of the study, she had been working there for 18 months.

Lack of knowledge, skill and confidence

Before the Group Intervention, Julie recalls, she had felt inadequate about sharing her ideas and opinions with her colleagues. These feelings of inadequacy caused Julie to become more aware of her tendency to doubt herself. On reflection, she realises that she underestimated her own input, and becomes more aware of the extent to which she can identify her contributions in her colleagues' work. More importantly, this realisation has an impact on her understanding about her ability to effectively influence others. In the extract below, Julie describes her anxiety about her own capacity and her contributions:

That sometimes that my input does mean something even if saying it I don't think at the time, when we all come together what I say can actually mean something even though I don't have much interest. Well, not interest. I feel like I don't have much contribution, but I actually had.

Examining implicit beliefs

Julie begins to realise that she has a lot to offer and she starts to feel more certain about her contributions. Therefore, she can rationalise her feelings of inadequacy with the influence she has on her colleagues' practice and this helps her confidence to improve, reducing her sense of anxiety. After participating in the Group Intervention, Julie realises how a child 'flapping' was linked to them learning about themselves and their world. She is more aware that the child only 'flaps' when she is excited and she tunes in to the child's ways of expressing herself. She starts to observe the child more closely and makes sure that she supports her play by thinking more deeply about what the child's flapping might mean. This leads her to change the way in which she thinks, uprooting and reorganising her beliefs about her understanding of the child, and reducing her anxiety in dealing with her.

In the extract below, Julie describes how she begins to pay more attention to the child's communication:

I would say certain activities or body language that they are doing makes me think they are doing it for a reason. ... Can I talk about the child I observed? [*Interviewer nods*]. Like Laura with her flapping, when I see it now I try to think why is she doing that. Or is she excited? And her facial expressions, and I try to maybe lead her into something that'll keep her flowing throughout her day.

Julie explains how she begins to perceive differently how a child is struggling with her language because she observes and listens to what the child is saying and doing. She realises that she can use her observations of the child to support learning. Julie reflects upon the extent to which she had not understood their way of learning – this leads her to question her

understanding. Consequently, she becomes more able to recognise progress and her perceptions of the child change.

It seems that Julie changes her perception of the child's abilities by understanding their communication style and by taking steps to observe them more closely. In this extract, she describes how she becomes more aware of the child's progress.

Malcolm with his language difficulties... I think we all tried to have a better understanding of what he is trying to tell you, give him more time and the children are as well I think. But his language has come on a lot more better and I think him being one of the children to focus on has helped all of us and him being here.

At various points in her account, Julie suggests that the Group Intervention helped her to become aware of what she needed to do to improve her practice. She recalls how she began to sharpen her focus during observation, which led to her to move onto 'new levels of observing'. Julie associates her improvement with the experience of the Group Intervention. She offers the experience as a major turning point in becoming aware of previously unfamiliar aspects about the child's development.

She also recognises that she is better at doing observations than she had thought, which suggests a new understanding of self is beginning to form. More importantly, she begins to probe and question herself. She considers how the child is learning and, as a result, finds herself adapting her perspective, which ultimately increases her self-understanding:

It was a bit of a challenge but I quite enjoyed it as well. [Pause]. I found out, the child I observed, I knew a lot more than I thought I did and it's taken me to new levels of observing and knowing that child and looking deeper into what they do – taking more of an insight.

This extract again draws attention to Julie's changing perception. She describes how she begins to process information about what the child is doing differently and recalls how she starts to think more deeply about the child. This leads to substantial changes in her perception, which also heightens her awareness of herself.

More importantly, it reduces her anxiety about the child's development and helps her get to know the child better. It is likely that the Group Intervention provided Julie with new information, which allowed her to challenge her own sense of inadequacy. It also helped her to explore her beliefs and perceptions and encouraged her to understand her work:

My perceptions changed I think... because when I, when I... Like Laura would be flapping away and I'd be constantly thinking well 'Why is she doing that? Why is she doing this?' And now I've got a few answers and trying to encourage her to get away from that and encourage her to do like another activity, but I know she's still doing it and I'm still like: 'Why's she doing that?' I, I think it's excitement sometimes; it's a few things.

Julie conveys quite poignantly how she changed her perception and attitude about several children as she became more aware of their development. She recalls how she adjusted her own behaviour, helping her to better support the children's development. She indicates that her understanding of the child's behaviour improved significantly. Julie is therefore able to challenge and rationalise her own thoughts and feelings. More importantly, because she stops underestimating the children's abilities, she is much more informed and, thus, increases her self-understanding.

I think I saw a few children differently. I had my eyes wider to a wider picture; apart from that I think that is all I have gained out of that part.

What clearly emerges from Julie's account is that she is changing by perceiving things differently and by assuming a different attitude about herself and her work. She questions how her preconceived ideas affected her understanding. She is therefore able to open herself up to a new level of awareness.

This theme highlights how Julie removes the limits which severely hamper her capacity to observe. As a result, she enhances her self-awareness and skills. Thus, observations without thought and questions can be understood as relating to the notion of not taking the opportunity to think about practice. Julie's willingness to engage in the Group Intervention expresses her commitment to herself and her work. It also signals that she is moving away from her inadequacies.

I think it has benefited me because... I think all my children will develop differently now I observe them differently. I think I am helping them more. In a way, I feel like it has just given me a boost so it has given them a boost to help them with new challenges.

Becoming a team

Julie recalls how sensitive she was to her colleagues' ideas and opinions about her key child. Subsequently, because of her interest and contributions to the discussions in a relatively short period, her initial sensitivity is substituted with enjoyment. She realises that she is being defensive because she does not have all the information. In this extract, Julie describes her experience:

I was quite happy and chuffed with the things I found out about some of the children and... I was a bit sensitive in some of the parts as well.

During the Group Intervention, Julie's understanding of child development begins to increase. She starts to better understand aspects of her work. Interestingly, as this happens, her perception towards herself changes. Julie explicitly points to how the group discussion helped her to integrate her understanding into her work. In this extract, she describes how she becomes interested in the group sharing their viewpoints and opinions about the child:

I think all of our discussions have helped all of us. When we are in the room we all talk as a group about a child and we all have a little input, and it kind of links us all together if that makes sense?

Notably, Julie recalls how she supports Kate by providing her with the right level of relevant knowledge and experience to navigate her way through new assessment reporting systems. Yet again, Julie points to the degree that her confidence increases by communicating her ideas and helping others. It is most likely that the Group Intervention helped Julie to utilise her knowledge and skills because it gave her a platform to express her understanding, which increased her confidence. It also helped her to use her understanding of Kate's perspective to inform the level of support that she provides:

Earlier on, Kate was having a review and she asked me about this two-year progress check and was just wanting me to go through the parents what it actually was. I just said it's kind of check list of where their child's at and what stage they are at, but that's fine within their age range and not worry about it. And she was a bit worried so I just helped her see through that and she was OK.

I think helping some of the other girls here, I feel like I've grown in confidence; if they ask me something I may be able to give them a better explanation for certain things if they want help with their children.

In analysing her position, Julie makes the case for continuing the facilitated work group discussions, while also pointing to the usefulness of the structure. She conveys quite clearly how she feels that the Group Intervention helped her to reflect on her understanding and allowed her to think more deeply.

I think the evaluation at the end. I think you was very helpful... useful with reasons for why a child might be doing a certain action or their characters and it made us all think: 'Oh! That is why they are doing that'. And I think it's really, really helped all of us since this project's been going on.

Again, Julie points to the extent to which her understanding begins to inform her work with planning and parents. She feels that she is maturing as a practitioner. Her sense of increased confidence and empowerment is captured by the two extracts below:

I have... Yeah I think I have learnt a lot – a lot more about the children than I thought I did. When it comes to planning for their needs and their files and talking to parents as well, I feel like I've grown in that quite a lot.

I feel like I'm meeting their needs more when it comes to activities, building relationships, at meal times, bonding with parents, I think I've come forward in all of it since it's been going on.

This suggests that at least one part of the reason why Julie has matured sufficiently enough to separate her perceived inadequacies from her capabilities is because she has developed her understanding and thinking. This makes her more self-aware and able to reflect, ultimately reducing her sense of anxiety.

Julie clearly perceives that before the Group Intervention her work had no meaning. Now she is asserting her sense of self into her work and feeling more valued and respected, which suggests a striking change in her understanding. Much of Julie's views of her maturity produce a balance with her description of feeling more professional and confident, as the extract below illustrates:

I feel a lot more confident and I feel I have more of a role with my children. I feel like I am a better key person than I was before.

I feel like I am more professional. I feel like I am not just a nursery nurse that looks after some children. I feel I have more of a meaning and that helping them to, to learn...

Summary

What clearly emerges as central to Julie's account is the way in which she feels that she has developed an understanding of child development and herself. Her account highlights how she altered her perception of herself; she takes responsibility for her learning and accepts that she needs to learn more about the children. She talks about seeing beyond the play and questioning the function of behaviour.

Consequently, she starts to see the child's play differently and seems to consider her professional development as being vital in her construct of herself. The process of sharing information in the Group Intervention helps her to enhance her learning and enables her to recognise where she needs to develop. Julie feels that she has gained more insight from others and some of her fears of being judged reduce. Her perception of the Group

Intervention is symbolised by her account of how she starts to work more closely with others and of feeling more professional and valued.

Appendix R: Data analysis - Erica

When the research started, Erica was a 23-year-old woman. She had wanted to become an architect. However, when she left school at the age of 16 she did not have the grades she needed to pursue architecture as a career. She focused on what she was good at and realised it was helping her nieces and nephews to learn. Therefore, she decided upon a career in Early Years education. Erica enrolled at a local college where she completed her Diploma in Childcare and Education Levels 2 and 3. She had worked at two other nurseries before taking up her position as an Early Years Practitioner at Fiddle Sticks, where she had worked for five years and five months at the time of the study.

Lack of knowledge, skills and confidence

Erica recalls how the discussions with her colleagues contributed to her learning more about herself and the child. She notes how 'everyone could see clearly what he was doing' and she could not. She realises the issues were her own. This realisation prompts reflection which helps her to gain insight and better understand herself and her abilities. In the two extracts below, she provides an illustration of how the experience makes her aware of the extent to which her views on the child are influenced by her own insecurities:

Well going back to the first one that we ever done with the trucks like, I just was like 'What's he doing? He is just sitting on a truck, pushing a truck around in a circle, round and around. What is he doing?' And like, when I looked at it was like I don't get it, and then when we all had that discussion and it was just interesting how everybody could see clearly about what he was doing.

I remember one of them; it was not really a big issue. It is just because I just did, as I said, I didn't feel like how is like... how, how, how can you watch this child and just think 'Oh look, they are doing all... all of this in one thing? Oh he keeps doing this!' Going up and down with a truck and round in a circle. And actually from watching it, it has helped me just see the bigger picture.

Erica recalls that, at the start of the Group Intervention, she struggled with the idea of group discussions with her peers. She explains that she had felt defensive because she thought that her colleagues would not understand her key child as she did. When she reflects upon the extent to which she was being possessive, she realises this is because of her own insecurity about her own lack of knowledge.

Following her presentation, she becomes intrigued by the process of the discussions and decides to challenge her limiting beliefs about herself. Therefore, she can rationalise her own expectations about her colleagues knowing more than she does, by letting go of the self-imposed limitations. It is interesting to note that Erica no longer feels that she can come up with the answer about the child's play on her own. It is most likely that Erica got defensive because she lacked confidence. In the extract below, Erica provides an illustration of how she begins to change her understanding of herself and the issues that she had felt defensive about:

At the beginning, I used to get really frustrated. Like I used to be like, 'You don't know my key children'. Like a little, a little bit defensive. 'That is not what they are doing! How can you tell?' Now I am like no, bring it on. Let me know what you know, because I am seriously missing... I might be missing something out, but before I would not have been like that. I'd always be like if someone was saying something I'd be like... and then I'd beat myself up because I'd go, 'Oh, why did I not think of that?'... because they've said that and then I'd go, 'Oh I knew that.' But now I'm just like: 'Please just talk to me,

let me know what my children are doing, because I can see some it, but actually I want you to tell me what you can see.' So it's helped me so much.

Examining implicit beliefs

It seems most likely that the Group Intervention provided Erica with the opportunity to reflect on her own limitations. She explains how she starts to be more proactive by deliberately focusing her thoughts and discarding her false beliefs about the process. She describes the Group Intervention as 'having done me the world of good' as she becomes able to understand things about herself and her work that she did not understand before. In the extract below, Erica provides an example of how she becomes consciously aware that she needs to improve her practice.

Ooh, at the beginning my first one I was just like 'Oh my God, this is going to be negative. Stella's going to say something and I don't know I'm going to like it and...' Actually, it done me the world of good, because like your knowledge and your input actually helped me and then it started off like a little bowling ball going round and round and round with all the other stuff. So, no it's, it's done really well.

Erica explains how it gives her a completely new perspective as she chooses to shift her thinking and her views about herself and her work. More significantly, she becomes more self-aware; it changes her perception of herself and what her real abilities are. She realises the extent to which her lack of knowledge is affecting her practice. Now she regards the discussions with others as important, because they help her to realise that her beliefs are affecting her ability and it gives her a more balanced perspective on herself and others. Thus, her self-perception is being altered by the fact that she has

embraced her own inadequacies. It is clear that challenging her beliefs enables Erica to achieve previously inconceivable results. As the extract below illustrates, Erica learns how to confront and overcome her insecurities.

It has changed my perception on stuff because, as I said, it is like I'm looking at them and I'm like actually, 'What are they getting out of this? What are they actually doing?' But, it's like actually going back like either to Claire or again at the staff meeting and we're all just sitting there discussing it, it's like: 'Whoa'. Sometimes I am getting a more better insight than me, just myself, looking at it. We're discussing it also it has... yeah, definitely benefited.

Observing the Group Intervention critically offers Erica an opportunity to develop and refine her observation skills. This allows her to be more thoughtful in her actions and significantly increases her capacity to do her job. She explains how she stops intervening by stepping back, reflecting and thinking more about how the child is learning. She indicates that she feels more confident about asking for help. Before the Group Intervention, Erica tended to see only what she knew about – now she is watching the child more closely, which informs her perspective of them. Moreover, she comes to understand the kinds of conditions which help to facilitate learning for the child. In the extract below, she describes how she becomes more receptive:

What from watching them? Just so much; like how they just take like a simple sticking activity, they just drizzle the glue and we are all like, 'You have got to put stuff on that.' But, no actually they haven't. The process and the effect of what they are doing is just drizzling that glue. I'm not going to stop them from doing it, whereas as I said before I would of made sure that they'd 'Cover that glue up, you are going to get it all over the table.' But, it's just changed a lot now. That boost to go, oh I can just sit back and watch. Actually, you know I am going to watch; now I am not going to ask what you are doing. So it's, it has made me, a nursery practitioner much more... my job is more worthwhile.

The Group Intervention gives Erica an opportunity to share her observations. This clearly helps her to challenge herself professionally. She explains how she can write a report on a child knowledgeably by refocusing on what she knows about the child and asking others. In the extract below, Erica describes how she becomes more able to integrate her knowledge of the child into her report, writing:

Oh, massively! Like I feel more confident now. I feel like when I am working with children that actually I know who they are. Before I might start off and think 'I have not got a clue what this child's doing, I don't know why they are roaming, roaming the trucks', but actually break it all down, I do know what my children like. Like just doing a report, I was so nervous about one child. I was like, 'That child, do not talk to me, I do not know him, anything about him.' I took it home to start writing it I done like a page and a half of it. So it... to me it's given me a better insight of my key children and of the others, because we've all come together now. Like every now again I've gone, 'Oh, I have just done this report can you help me? Have I got it down?' And another member's like 'I need help on this child.' And we were like, go on then, like that. So it's actually given me a big massive confidence and to work better in a team, and that's what we're here to do other than be there for the children. Like, if you do not ever talk to your team staff, you will not ever get anything.

Erica reports considerable improvements in her observations and planning because of participating in the Group Intervention. Another positive benefit is that she feels her files have significantly improved, whereas previously she had struggled to complete them. It is likely that the Group Intervention allowed Erica to question her insecurities about herself and this helped her to become more aware of her capacity. In the extract below, Erica describes the improvements to her practice:

The planning is improved so much lately from doing it, again with the observations we've been more hands on now with them and even their files I would say, like, with my key group children's files I feel like they've come on a lot. Like there is... before there has to be loads

and loads in their files and I am like no, you do not need that now. Actually, you just need what they are doing, so I feel like my files have improved.

The Group Intervention helped Erica to become aware of the motives behind her practice and beliefs about herself, giving her the encouragement to alter her practice. She recognises that her approach to working with the children has changed considerably and that it has become more effective than before the Group Intervention. Reflecting on her attitude allows her to change how she sees her role and the children. She has changed herself by discarding her previous beliefs. It is most likely that her self-imposed limits have obstructed the flow of knowledge and understanding in the past.

In the extracts below, Erica describes the changes in her attitude, responsiveness and effectiveness:

Yeah, yeah no it has changed a lot because I just think my, my attitude towards it now is much more clearer. Like I am just so much more positive about it. I am not just looking at children and thinking 'Oh God, I've got to change a nappy, I've got to do this and potty training' even though I've got to do them - but, I'm always talking to them. Always talking to the children. Even potty training I will sit on the floor reading them a story for ages while they are trying to have a wee. It, it has just changed my approach in the way that I work and it is like I don't want to be sitting back and just watching them. Actually, yeah it is vital that you watch them because sometimes you... if you are hands on too much then they are not going to find their own feet, go off, observe on their own, and explore their own knowledge stuff. But, no it's just helped me a lot just to understand the children.

It makes me feel like I know the job. [Laughs]. Because that is why I get up every morning, I get up to come and work with children.

Becoming a team

Before the Group Intervention took place, Erica recalls that she would often withdraw herself from the process as a way of coping with her insecurities. Following the Group Intervention, she reflects upon the extent to which her own insecurities had affected her competency and she begins to challenge them more consciously. In the extract below, Erica provides an illustration of how she faces her insecurities about herself:

It makes me feel good. It makes me feel really good, because it's like you are not just one little pony sitting in a corner trying to do all this work on your own. It, it makes me feel excited because it like right I, I, I'll benefit from a staff meeting now, whereas before I just wanted to sit there and just go home. I'm like, 'Oh what is the point? I just want to sit about and talk about some random thing that someone's done last week.' So, no, it makes me feel much better now to sit in the staff meeting - be more positive about it.

Erica's description conveys a sense that she now feels liberated from her self-imposed isolation. The Group Intervention provided her with a space to focus her observations and challenged her to stand back, examine in detail what the child is doing, and consider her own response. In this extract, she describes the benefits of her new method of observing:

I mean I was so different because it's given me a clearer insight of actually what I can see and, like, what I can do with them, and actually just observing them from... and, like, for example, not having to have a pen and paper there. Actually just watching what they are doing and how that is benefited

Later, Erica reflects on how she has deepened her knowledge of child development. She realises that the Group Intervention has been pivotal in helping her to re-evaluate her practice. Her recollections particularly highlight

how she engages in the process of learning from her observations and the impact this has on her practice and perspective.

It is interesting to note that her perspective on many aspects of her work contrasts markedly with her perspective before the Group Intervention. For Erica, to be able to explain her practice to others is highly significant to her understanding about herself. In the example below, Erica provides an illustration of the impact of her change of perception on her practice:

Loads of it! It has helped with my talking, with my staff – it has helped me better my observations. I, I, I have noticed my observations have come on leaps and bounds like from, from, from doing it, the course. It's actually helped me with activities, just to support them and like to do activities. Like today, this morning I done the creative table and I just done normal water paint with watercolours and then I thought: 'No, I'm not going to stop there, I'm going to do something else.' And we did the play dough, and I got all the play dough out and all the cups out with the children. I was like: 'Come on then.' And the temp lady was like, 'Oh, do we have to do this.' I was like 'No, just let them do it.' And I was just standing back, and even that normally I'd be like: 'No.' Like I'd be pretty hands-on with them, but I just stood there was like, 'Ok, fill that cup up for me'. We were asking open-ended questions, and we had discussions about what they were doing. It, it was amazing... and actual... that, that is how I could see that I have changed a lot, because before I'd be like 'No! You have to put the cup properly and this...'

Summary

What clearly emerges from Erica's account is the way in which she feels self-awareness has been developed. She discusses feeling motivated by the Group Intervention and how it has transformed her observational practice and increased her confidence. Erica clearly makes links between her observation tasks, development needs, interests and thinking beyond outcomes. Thus, she seems to consider continuing in her career with a new-

found excitement about her role. Erica also feels that she knows the children and herself much better. Erica clearly perceives that sharing and reflecting as a team has brought about more cohesion and respect for each other. The assertion of self in standing up to her fears is symbolised in her account of being more willing to gain insight from others, and being less possessive about her knowing her key children.

Appendix S: External Consultant's report

Dear Stella,

I had a very enjoyable and interesting time with your participants at Fiddle Sticks yesterday. They made me very welcome and were completely unanimous in their appreciation of the work you have been doing with them. Here are the notes I made about the actual conversations as I think there are some nice quotes for you that will give you even more of a flavour of the conversations!

Fiddle Sticks Group One

- Insight into what's happening – deeper.
- Being in teams, changed meetings, become much more productive – much more focused on the children and our planning has changed because of it too.
- We look at the children we've focused on and that's our next steps - and evaluating.
- A lot more children are doing similar activities – might have spotted one child but it meets the needs of other children too!
e.g. mud kitchen - observations noticed tipping, pouring, imagination so the children gather more resources – petals for herbs.
- Giving them the time to extend the activities before we would not have observed with them in the same way - we would not have taken so much notice ... what we are learning from what they are doing. It would have looked the same but we are learning with them. So we might plan how to link to the water play, different textures etc. link with schema.
- It has been so good individually, but also how we work together – we all see different things and feed that in! so for example we're all now helping each other with reports - not just the key person.
- Schemas, language, imagination – out of this world, for example, one child jumping from crate to crate, before we'd have just noticed, now we realised she was exploring height – and seeing it more broadly, seeing and remembering what other things she does like trampolines, pulleys etc. We see them in more depth, analyse it - Oh they are doing that! Get the camera!

- Gathering resources to extend their play.... sometimes we repeat and let them return to the play and change it for themselves – for example with the crates, next day she changed the shape to a curve.... with the sand, it's blue sand with sea creatures in it. Now they've got paint pots and they're doing tipping and pouring ... we were going to put it away but then noticed that they'd started playing something different with it - and now (at the meeting) they're talking about how to extend it (R was playing - imagination) - just happens. This year it is happening all the time, this year we are using the EYFS but it is the children who are leading – we know EYFS, so we are planning for the children. It is simple stuff, not making it elaborate.
- We come back to the activity, review it, and see how it develops. We make sure that within six weeks ALL children are observed in depth – and we talk about them every week in staff meeting - so about 11 children each week (plus other children will be discussed as things naturally crop up). We all contribute – we don't just focus on “my child” – and communicate what we observe with others.
- Evaluations help us know they are making progress, we do the next steps and at the end of the week we observe how that went, did it work, what do we need to change? In addition, we have progress trackers – more formal – we do the observations, go back to the baseline matrix, and use it as evidence to check how they are doing overall. The head has an overview of progress for all the children and can monitor who's doing what - and we discuss where we may have concerns about the children.

Additional comments

- It's been amazing, a great insight.
- Opened all our eyes – seeing Stella do that has inspired me and now I'm looking for more courses.
- Gave us a boost in terms of our learning and enthusiasm.
- Makes us feel good at our job – she finds it really interesting that we know about our children.
- Light bulb moments that Stella picks up from what we've said - and we see the learning. Actually I didn't think of that - really lucky that we've had that

opportunity. And it doesn't stop here – we're still learning, and Stella is still learning, our confidence has grown.

- Now staff meetings are more purposeful, interesting, productive – we're happy to stay now!!!

Fiddle Sticks Group Two

- Discussions as a group, a team. Feedback – where we all, each of us discuss the observation and we all have an input and together we come to a conclusion
- Highlighted it for me that as a team we need each other and it's really good to discuss a child with each other and they see things that you don't see. We have different relationships with the children, we're different people so together we see the whole picture of the child because we've seven, we have seven outlooks!
- How much we've changed our observations style, how we monitor progress, we've changed to a weekly focus.
- We have a couple of children that we all look – it's everyone's responsibility, not just the key worker.
- Taking time to watch and then record. It's become more insightful and more valuable.
- The observations, not how much you write, but what and how to move on.
- When you discuss a child you suddenly think – and these children need this too!! Realise the other children in the same place. If we look at L – she was quite a quiet child and it was good to focus on her. Taking time to think about what is happening with her, what is she doing by herself, is she unhappy? No. It is the quality of what we put out – much better. We put things out, we stay a bit longer – and I used to see something and write it down, now I stay a bit longer, and put it in context and see something much broader, and deeper. Yes she's done the puzzle, but now she's gone off and she's putting bricks. You see children doing similar things in different way. The children are happier because we understand them better. We are providing what they need, it is nice to be able to put what they are doing into the context for learning, what doing that puzzle means.
- See what is in front of your nose, back to basics.

- We used to make it more complicated than it is!, We went way beyond what the child was actually interested in achieving!
- Last night we were talking about crates, and then someone said I saw her on this. Everyone brings in observations from their own perspectives... link to schema in some sort of way, not one of them have been the same so far, it's the combination of schemas – children do two or three different things at the same time!
- The debate part really valuable, really pulled us together as a team.
- Each child has benefited from it - e.g. from frustrated, lashing out to happy, relaxed, communicating using signing and sounds communication between staff and child, the understanding of the child, staff have more of a desire to find out about the child.
- I think it has brought back that little bit of love for the job – you can go into robot mode, the sparkle has come back.
- We've learned so much – an all-round circular process.
- A different year of children – a different way of learning for us.
- You are motivated to develop and bring the child on – discussions really motivational. So much comes out of the discussions that do not just benefit that child, but all children.
- We are seven as one.
- We are a team again – the key person had maybe taken us apart, but this research has brought us together again, working together, sharing experience!
- On a personal level a journey of discovery for each of the children, for me, for them too – discovering themselves. I can speak out, I can do this. Confidence for me and for them, as I understand their learning journeys.
- We have grown, we know our jobs, we know our children, and we know how to move them on.
- Big impact on how we think and feel. It changes what we put out, it's more challenging,
- We are more excited and our imaginations and practice has grown a lot.
- It is a happier place to work, as everyone feels confident about what they are doing.
- We're pulling it together – we use the observations from that week in a staff meeting and say what those children have been doing and what needs to happen the next week. We ask the children a lot more now too and there is

an ordered system about it so that we can make sure we look at all children. We used to miss children, now they all get their fair attention and focus on development. You can update your baseline matrix more systematically and you've good information to draw on for all children – an overall picture of that child.

- A move away from paperwork driving the practice to using the practice to inform the paperwork – iPad really helping to minimise the paperwork and keep it essential – and you capture such beautiful pictures that say it all!
- It has been wonderful having Stella's wealth of knowledge and enthusiasm giving us her time – makes us feel special and valued, she values us as we value her. Having someone come in, and when we have our down days – she comes in and actually (she says) give yourselves credit!
- Having Stella come in – she is a critical but supportive friend. She is focused on our learning. She gives us guidance and helps us to come together – great facilitator.
- In discussions, to begin with, we needed Stella to help us sum it up but now we can do it ourselves more. Our challenge is to continue. The only scary bit is when Stella's gone we'll need to find our own way to keep motivated and inspired. She came yesterday and already we're thinking about preparing for the next visit.

Summary of discussion

- They feel that both formal staff meetings and more informal staff interactions have become much more productive – more focused on children.
- That the whole staff is feeling more confident, more motivated, and enjoying the job more – and this has a very positive impact on children's learning and wellbeing.
- "It's opened our eyes."
- The process, and Stella's support, has helped everyone feel good at their job – lucky they have had the opportunity.
- There seems to have been a significant impact on the team's feelings about themselves as reflective practitioners, and their ability and enthusiasm to

learn (when I was there they were talking about other learning opportunities they'd like to explore).

- They see the challenge as how to continue.
- They talk more about schema.
- They feel they talk in more depth about the children, and are particularly impressed by the quality of the insight brought by having all the team of seven bringing their insights about the children.
- "The debate part has really pulled us together as a team."
- They find the discussions really motivating "we're a team again".
- They feel they are much more likely to "get" what the child is focused on – and therefore in a better position to provide resources and ideas to extend the play.
- They feel they have more confidence about when to stand back and when to join in.
- That they are more confident and relaxed about relating their knowledge of the children to the EYFS and using it to plan more purposeful next steps.
- They've also noticed that as they talk about individual children, as a group they can quickly identify other children who would benefit from similar interventions, resources and support.
- They feel that they can use their reflections to be more challenging in what they offer the children.
- "We're more excited and our imaginations and practice has grown a lot."
- With the new way of working each child is the focus – in a systematic way. The observations are fed into planning and children's learning captured in the ongoing records.
- The manager also has an overview of the progress of all the children and uses this in discussions with the staff to have an impact on the way the team works.
- They feel that the work they are doing is more relevant and has helped to reduce the paperwork by keeping the focus on what is useful and purposeful.

Well done – it sounds an amazing piece of work.

Warm wishes

Jane Cook

11 July 2013

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